



**Engagement, Technology and Tutors: Experiences of
Distance Online Students**

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Abstract

For at least the last decade student engagement in Australian higher education has been one focus of research and policy development. However, research and policy development have not been applied evenly across the sector, with an emphasis on gathering data from students studying in the on-campus mode. Simultaneously, online learning has insinuated itself into most, if not all, modes and forms of teaching and learning in higher education, but has impacted distance education more than other modes.

Given the existing policy focus, most current research in this area has tended to be oriented towards the sector or institutions rather than students. This investigation turned to a small group of students to provide insights into their engagement with studying in the distance mode, online. It sought to foreground their experiences of their engagement and thereby promote a better understanding by others of how students' higher education experience can be improved.

Responding to calls for more research into off-campus (distance) student engagement (Coates, 2006) and for new research approaches to e-learning (Friesen, 2009), this qualitative study used semi-structured interviews to elicit student participants' perceptions of their engagement as students and the impact which tutors and technology had on their engagement and perceptions of it. The data were then analysed within a human science research framework (van Manen, 1990), employing methods from phenomenology and hermeneutics.

Although the participants were distance students, they did not study in isolation. Findings from the investigation also suggested that student relations with tutors and peers were important to their engagement with their study. As well, the findings of the investigation foregrounded the recurring themes derived from the data that underpinned student perception of engagement: connectedness, reciprocity, pragmatism, routine, involvement, online identity and online image. It also identified not only the freedom which technology afforded distance students in terms of the time and place of their engagement, but also their creativity in their control over the manner in which they

engaged with peers and tutors and highlighted the importance of tutors understanding the perceptions of engagement held by those students whom they may never see. It also became evident that while tutors perceived engagement in terms of student learning and content, students' perceptions of engagement were more complex and included interest generated by study materials, the quality of interaction with other students and tutors and the usefulness of these interactions in their study.

Importantly, this investigation demonstrated that a detailed qualitative approach could foreground the subtle and nuanced themes impacting the way distance online students engaged. Understanding these themes will lead to pedagogical frameworks sensitive to distance students' experiences online.

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Chapter One: Locating the Investigation

The philosopher cannot provide formulaic answers to the questions posed, nor are there in any likelihood such simple answers. (Ihde, 1990, p. 9)

1.1 Introduction

The investigation reported in this dissertation aimed to answer questions focussed on a specific aspect of student engagement: the perceptions of initial teacher education, distance students with regard to their engagement through studying online¹. Student voice on engagement is under-represented in research literature. In taking a qualitative research design, this investigation sought to redress this imbalance. Qualitative design also enabled this investigation to address soft outcomes (Zepke & Leach, 2010) of student engagement which specifically are those aspects and outcomes not necessarily able to be quantified.

The investigation focused on students' voices in order to gain an understanding of their perceptions thus complementing the significant existing research focus on student engagement factors related to student academic success, progression or attrition.

Aside from students, there are two other significant players in this investigation: tutors and technology. Both are integral contributors to, and mediators of, students' experiences. Both needed to be investigated to determine their impact on student engagement.

For this investigation, a small group of initial teacher education, distance, online students and tutors was interviewed in order to understand their perceptions of engagement. Students were encouraged to articulate their understanding of student engagement and to discuss issues and experiences which they felt impacted their engagement. Tutors were interviewed because of the importance of their relationship with, and influence on, students. Their dispositions, attitudes and

¹ With respect to the concept of studying online, there are many terms which are often used interchangeably. Beside online education, other terms are: online learning, e-learning, online teaching and learning, virtual learning to name a few. I shall use online study or online learning as terms to cover both teaching and learning online.

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beliefs, as well as their competencies in using technology, have the potential to impact students' experiences and hence their engagement.

In the distance education context technology is an important communication bridge between students and tutors. As technology becomes increasingly sophisticated in design, capacity and use, no investigation of the phenomenon of distance study would be complete without considering the role and impact of technology on student engagement.

Data generated from the semi-structured interviews were analysed using van Manen's (1990) approach of human science research based in hermeneutic phenomenology.

There are two significant drivers in the design of this investigation.

1. The need for good qualitative research into the detail of student engagement.

As the literature will evidence, to date much research into student engagement has been institutionally and policy-oriented, quantitative and focussed on the outcomes of engagement. While this underpins significant progress in understanding student engagement, particularly as it relates to student learning outcomes, it tells only part of the engagement story.

2. The need for research into distance online student engagement:

Much of the existing research on engagement focuses on the institution, discipline or cohort and overlooks variations which might exist within the broad heterogeneity of Australasian higher education. With the exception of research being undertaken in New Zealand (for example, Kahu, 2013; Kahu, Stephens, Leach & Zepke, 2014; Leach & Zepke, 2011; Zepke & Leach, 2010), there has been considerably more research investigating on-campus student engagement. Whilst the differential in student numbers between the two modes has been a relevant consideration in designing research projects, the unique context of distance online students suggests that their engagement might have its own distinct characteristics.

This chapter has two main aims. The first is to establish where the investigation is situated in the higher education environment by clarifying terms and constructs used in this dissertation. The second is to provide as much context as possible for the investigation.

1.2 Background

To better understand the place and significance of this investigation in terms of foregrounding students' perceptions, some background regarding student engagement, educational technology (including online study²) and distance education in the Australian higher education system needs to be outlined.

Because in the literature there is variation in meaning of some of the terms critical to this investigation, there is a need to include in this background information delimiting interpretations of some relevant terms and constructs. This investigation was intended to allow the participants' voices to be heard. It was not intended to pre-empt their perceptions and perspectives, or force onto participants rigid definitions or points of view. However, for reader clarity I provide a broad outline of the important terms.

1.2.1 Student engagement

Student engagement is a concept central to this investigation. I begin with a dictionary definition to highlight the word's inherent circularity. *Engagement* is defined in the Oxford English Dictionary (OED) as "the action of engaging or being engaged". Further, the "act of engaging" is to "establish a *meaningful* contact or *connection* with"..... (my emphasis).

The complexity of arriving at a simple, agreed understanding (let alone precise definition) of engagement is demonstrated by Heller, Beil, Dam and Haerum (2010) in their work with engineering students and faculty (tutors). They found that students perceive engagement as a commodity to be supplied by faculty, while faculty "expects students to be engaged and view the subject matter as inherently engaging" (p. 259). This finding underscores the subjective nature of engagement.

² Study in this context refers to formal and informal academic and non-academic activities associated with students' enrolments in a unit of study.

The immediate inference to be drawn from the OED definition of engagement is that engagement is a *connection* between *people* (albeit for distance students through technology); that it is ‘two-way’, and provides benefit to both parties. When engagement is used in the sense of technological embodiment or engagement with a process, this definition still holds in that the designer (and user) of the particular artefact or process will (or will have) received some benefit.

The two aspects of engagement which are emphasised in the definition above are *meaningfulness* and *connection*. It becomes evident from the literature that other descriptors which are used for engagement tend to relate more closely to the specifics of the approaches of researchers and the context in which the respective research was undertaken. Because of these multiple meanings Kahu (2013) asserts that engagement should be considered a meta-construct.

As a meta-construct, student engagement comprises a number of subordinate constructs or dimensions, and is approached from a number of different perspectives across the sectors and within research frameworks (Harris, 2011). Different parts of the research literature focus on one or more of these dimensions of student engagement rather than all of them. Therefore, in this sense, engagement is also a contested concept.

As a focus of research, student engagement is mostly identified in terms of improving the student experience – generally evidenced through improved learning outcomes. However, there are other dimensions of engagement referred to in the literature. Institutional, personal and content³ are options for describing engagement. Researching the impact of student engagement has extended to studying post-student outcomes. For example, evidence has been found that “social engagement was positively related to early career earnings of college graduates while academic engagement was not” (Hu & Wolniak, 2010, p. 750).

³ This construct was similar to the approach taken by Friesen and Kuskis, (2012) analysing modes of interaction – based on Garrison’s, (2007) work on Online Community of Inquiry.

There is also broader use of 'engagement' in higher education generally. This mostly occurs with reference to the marketing and management of higher education. In these cases the meaning may be implied, not but usually specified. For example, mostly when the term engagement is used in higher education marketing and web sites, it relates to institutional involvement in local or professional communities, not directly in regard to students. This could be considered it to be a generic or casual use. That is, it refers to a range of interactions between the institution and specified groups in a general manner. For example the University of South Australia has a "Centre for Regional Engagement".

... the Centre for Regional Engagement grew out of the University's decision to make regional engagement a priority. Dedicated academic and professional staff service the educational needs of these communities in the same way as the University services students studying at its Adelaide campuses.

(University of South Australia, 2014)

With such a wide variation in the use of the term 'engagement' in higher education, some of which is not appropriate to this investigation, the concept will be clarified in Chapter Two.

1.2.2 Educational technology

The process of defining *educational technology* for this investigation began with the broad notion of technologies as "those artifacts (sic) of material culture that we use in various ways within our environment" (Ihde, 1990, p. 1). Based on this definition, educational technology includes any technology which is used in an educational context, including technologies which normally may not be thought of as educational. For example, a slow cooker used as a teaching aid in a hospitality course could be considered an educational technology; as might office productivity software used for word-processing an assignment, and perhaps increasingly more usually, a mobile or smart phones used to communicate with tutors and peers as part of the study process. While for the most part the more orthodox examples of technology are the focus of this investigation, the definition of the term was left broad to encompass the full range of available technologies.

The increasing range and richness (particularly in sensory and social terms) of educational (and/or information and communication) technologies which mediate the experience of both students and tutors, also technologically transform the users' senses (Friesen, 2009). Investigating the impact and meaning of embodiment relations (Ihde, 1990) surrounding these technologies as they apply to students in particular, needs to listen to what students say about the transformations caused by the use of new media within their distance education landscape.

Online study is an evolving term which encompasses a number of current terms within the field of educational technology such as e-learning, online learning, virtual learning and technology enhanced learning. Specifically in this investigation, it refers to an environment based on a Learning Management System (LMS) platform. In some of the literature, this software, or more precisely suite of software applications "that automates the administration, tracking, and reporting of training events" (Ellis, 2009, p. 1), is called a Course Management System (CMS). The interchangeable use of these terms and other such as Content Management System (CMS) in the literature leads to considerable confusion.

1.2.3 Distance education

As opposed to the media of teaching and learning – the technology discussed in the previous section – *distance education* in the context of this investigation is defined as a mode of study. Des Keegan (1980), in his landmark paper, *On defining distance education*, proposed six characteristics which distinguish distance education from face-to-face/on-campus education. These are:

- separation of teacher and student;
- influence of an educational organisation especially in the planning and preparation of learning materials;
- use of technical media;
- provision of two-way communication;
- possibility of occasional seminars; and
- participation in the most industrialised form of education.

(Keegan, 1980, p. 21)

While the way in which some of these characteristics are expressed may seem a little archaic, nevertheless they still provide the most useful characterisation of distance education in that they progress beyond the simple use of a technology as a transmission device. The increasing sophistication of technologies used in distance education has led in part to a reduction in the on-campus requirements of many providing institutions. On-campus residential schools⁴ to which some participants refer were designed to undertake experiments, participate in discussions and other activities such as social interaction, at a time before interaction between students was supported by sophisticated Information Communications Technologies (ICT).

These characteristics can still be seen in discussions regarding distance education. For example, in their discussion of the history and heritage of distance education, Anderson and Simpson, (2012) outline an evolution of the thinking underpinning distance education. For them, while there may have been generational changes in pedagogies, technologies and policies, there are fundamental 'signposts' (p. 6) which identify distance education: contribution to social justice and equity, technology mediation, teamwork and interaction in design and implementation, a systematic approach, ongoing research and scholarship to build the field and the continuing focus on participants.

Distance higher education students with limited campus contact have had their range of communication options with peers, tutors and other support staff increased through the implementation of online study. However, in part, this investigation examined whether, from a student perspective, the improved provision arising from more sophisticated technology improved learning experiences for non-campus attending students.

1.3 The broader context

The significance of this investigation is also underscored by the current context and climate of higher education internationally. Educational technology, student engagement and distance education are

⁴ Sometimes called summer or vacation schools by participants.

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viewed through different lenses, each emphasising different aspects. Thus, considerable tension has been created between groups trying to influence higher education's perceptions.

Curtis Bonk (2004) used the metaphor of the 'perfect e-storm' to describe some of the tensions surrounding online study. Bonk describes these storms as:

- E-Storm #1: Emerging Technology: "dozens of innovative learning technologies ... cloud the online learning landscape";
- E-Storm #2: Enormous Learner Demand: "thousands of learners enrolling in online courses at many universities around the globe";
- E-Storm #3: Enhanced Pedagogy: "a plethora of collaborative and interactive techniques to engage online learners in both synchronous and asynchronous environments"; and
- E-Storm #4: Erased Pedagogy: "extensive cutbacks in budgets for these technologies, learners, and pedagogical ideas".

(Bonk, 2004, p. 4)

Sector-wide and institutional decisions are taken regarding all of these storms, but with little reference to students' views. This investigation offers a student-based contribution to the debate of at least some of these issues.

Student perceptions of engagement in online study are also impacted by a number of issues directly confronting Australian higher education:

1 Increasing ubiquity of ICT in education;

With the increasing availability and use of ICT both within and outside the education environment over the past few years, online study has insinuated itself into all modes and forms of teaching and learning in higher education in Australia.

2 Increasing level of sophistication of these technologies both in their technical capacities and in their pedagogical applications;

Along with increasing ubiquity, ICT used in education are becoming more sophisticated. This has in part accelerated the use of large complex LMS and a wide range of web 2.0 technologies.

3 **The use and publication in Australia of national survey data;**

Recommendation 7 of the Review of Higher Education Report (Bradley, Noonan et al., 2008) added the Australasian Survey of Student Engagement (AUSSE) to the list of mandated surveys to be reported annually. In spite of this recommendation never being formally agreed to by the Australian Government, the AUSSE has been implemented by most Australian (and New Zealand) universities. This introduced the term *student engagement* into the management and pedagogical discourse of universities in Australasia.

4 **Concern for improving higher educational opportunities and outcomes for isolated, regional and rural Australia (Bradley, Noonan et al, 2008).**

Australia has long standing experience in (higher) education provision for its regional, rural and isolated citizens. Beginning in the early part of the twentieth century a robust and progressive system of distance education provision has developed, and has been a leader in the implementation of new technologies.

These issues, and Bonk's (2004) storms apply pressure for the implementation of online study at the same time creating tensions. Collectively, they continue to place an increasing emphasis on the use of ICT in Australian higher education.

At the same time, the commodification and marketisation of higher education (Marginson, 1997; Marginson & Considine, 2000) have impacted in two ways. First is the increasing tendency, particularly at institutional level, to view students as clients and consumers and making decisions impacting them within a less consultative, market oriented context. Second is in placing pressure on

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the higher education sector to evidence quality outcomes and improved progression rates using quantitative tools, such as surveys and data mining (for example learning analytics). The use of metrics, benchmarks and discrete indicators to report to senior institutional managers and hence to the funding governments is now seen as essential⁵.

Students are using an increasing amount of technology. They also use technologies in ways not considered in the design and development of that technology. Indeed, although the unintended consequences of the use of technology are a society-wide phenomenon (Tenner, 1996), there has been little research regarding unintended consequences of the use of technology in higher education.

This investigation drew these issues of engagement and technology together within the context of distance online learning to focus on the students' perspectives. Throughout this investigation, I sat with students and tutors, listened to how they experienced and perceived what was happening in their world and, how they interpreted it. In doing so the investigation responds to the research question:

What are initial teacher education students' perceptions of engagement as they study online in the distance mode?

More specifically, within this context, this investigation aims to respond to the sub-questions:

- *What do students understand of their experiences of engagement?*
- *In what ways do educational technologies impact student engagement? and*
- *How do tutor attitudes impact student engagement? (particularly in the context of a technology environment)⁶*

1.4 The personal context and an understanding of technology

Now I need to reveal my perspective and the background which gave rise to it. I came late to qualitative research from a background in zoology, through psychology, sociology and education; all within the context of quantitative methods.

⁵ For example see the Australian Government Tertiary Education Quality and Standards Agency (<http://www.teqsa.gov.au/>).

⁶ The qualification of technology environment in this sub-question is in response to the fact that some tutors also tutored in the face-to-face/on-campus mode and I hoped to exclude this, as far as possible, from the tutor discussion. As all students were distance online, such a caveat was not necessary for them.

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At the same time, having spent many years working with tutors and students listening to the stories of their lives in the world of distance education, I felt that the research I was reading regarding student experiences in general and the impact of technology on online study in particular, did not reflect what I was hearing from them. The research spoke in means, standard deviations and variances rather than in experiences, perceptions and understandings. In doing so, the majority of research reports lost the opportunity to give voice to the *uniqueness* of the students' and tutors' experiences. In claiming to represent the whole, they spoke for no one in particular. By way of contrast, the richness of this investigation which comes from the depth of experience shared by the participants, challenges the unhelpful blandness of such surveys. Students' perceptions force a rethink of their engagement, and raise the question of how student engagement in distance online study can be re-conceptualised. In the search for a conceptual framework and method which enabled such a re-conceptualisation I was steered by my reading and supervisors towards investigating qualitative methods and more specifically those which arose from interpretive approaches. As will be outlined in Chapter Three, the hermeneutic phenomenology of van Manen was identified as meeting these needs.

Whilst this investigation focuses primarily on student engagement, the importance of technological mediation of participants' experiences requires that technology is understood in "its relationship with human existence" (Ihde, 2010, p. 29). At the point where technologies "directly engage our perceptual abilities" (Ihde, 2009, p. 42), the relationship is much closer than just human use of technology, it is an embodiment relation. As Ihde (2009) puts it: "*these embodiment relations [are] relations that incorporate material technologies or artifacts (sic) that we experience as taken into our very bodily experience*" (p. 42, his emphasis). This view of the human-technology relationship is more than a theoretical consideration of technology and its relation to the world. The praxical approach (Ihde, 2010) where the "artifact (sic) is symbiotically "taken into" [the] bodily experience and directed toward an action into or upon the environment" (Ihde, 2009, p. 42) provides a context within which the relationship between participants and technology is understood at a very practical

level. Examples will be provided regarding relations with technologies, in particular smart phones, and laptops computers.

Technology, in the sense that I am using it, notionally comprises two artefacts. It is independently the hardware and software, but also the combined action of these. Often the boundary between the two artefacts is blurred because of the manner in which the technologies are perceived and taken into the bodily experience by the participants. As participants spoke, there was an implicit acknowledgment of these as technology artefacts. Sometimes technologies facilitated and at other times hindered participants' experiences of their environments (interactions and communications between students and their peers and tutors). Moreover, there is also the sense of the receding visibility of the technologies as students become attenuated to them through continual use and improving skills. Also apparent from the student interviews is the backgrounding and foregrounding of technology, according to the impact of other environmental factors.

Whilst technology may be seen or withdrawn (Ihde, 2009) according to specific contexts, it still acts in ways which enter into the participants' "bodily, actional, perceptual relationship with [their] environment" (Ihde, 2009, p. 42). The manner in which it impacts these relations (specifically related to student engagement) was a significant part of the investigation.

1.5 The development of the investigation

The student centred approach is strengthened by qualitative design, based on semi-structured interviews. Nine students and five tutors were interviewed to elicit their understanding of student engagement as a general issue and their perceptions of how engagement applied to them in particular. To analyse the data a human science research approach as outlined by van Manen (1990) was taken, using his framework of the four life worlds as the basis for interpreting the data. Grounded in hermeneutics and phenomenology, this approach provided methodological, analytical and interpretative environments within a philosophical position, sensitive to the specific voice of each participant, yet robust enough to contest common orthodoxies. This approach presented the best opportunity to hear the emergent voices of the participants in a pragmatic way. Each of the

participants added significantly to my understanding of engagement and the impact of technology on it, thus forming the basis of this dissertation. Each participant contributed to the generation of rich and informative data. However, it was the similarities of the perceptions and stories of the participants that led to an effort to incorporate as many as possible in the dissertation. By no means identical in their responses however, they focus attention on a range of perceptions of the phenomenon under study.

I conducted two semi-structured interviews with eight of the student participants and one semi-structured interview with one of them. I also conducted two semi-structured interviews with four of the tutor participants and one semi-structured interview with one of them. I transcribed each interview for analysis and provided participants with the opportunity of checking that I had made an accurate representation of their interview. The wealth of data generated deserves more space than one dissertation could ever provide, therefore, in structuring the writing of this dissertation, there are a number of constructed limitations which I identify as they appear. The themes presented emanate from the analysis and interpretation of the interviews. The interesting issue was that any consensus appeared at all.

Participant students in this investigation are mature aged. That is to say, they entered (or returned to) university study with little higher education experience, but considerable life experience. They are students who rarely, if ever attend a university campus. They are students who are studying to be teachers. As will become evident, life for students participating in this investigation was neither easy, nor straight-forward. Their perceptions were not constructed or developed in isolation: they were moulded by their experience and hence truly pragmatic.

1.6 Parameters

Various research design parameters will be detailed in Chapter Three. However, before then I shall briefly canvass two general issues which were dealt with in undertaking this investigation, as these issues impacted the overall boundaries of the investigation, and subsequently the literature review in Chapter Two.

Firstly, while in general this investigation focuses on distance online higher education, a considerable amount of available literature and research relating to the topic is related to the Foundation Year to Year 12 (Foundation – 12)⁷ sector and the on-campus environment of higher education. Because of this, I have identified the specific sectors from which the literature is drawn to avoid confusion arising from varying terminology and approaches used in these different sectors.

Secondly, the participants in this investigation include a small group of tutors, but not necessarily tutors directly involved with the student participants. However, these tutors all have experience in distance online education within the Faculty. The rationale for the inclusion of tutors is that as tutors, they would be able to provide a related but alternative perspective of the online distance experience and the context in which it operates at the university. This is particularly relevant to the data analysis because of the important role tutors and their actions played in the students' pedagogic environment and experiences.

1.7 Selection of literature

The nature of this investigation means there is a broad church of background literature from which to draw. However, while each part of the research question had its own body of work, when this investigation was initiated, limited literature was available that brought together the areas of student engagement, distance education and online study, particularly from a student perspective. This changed somewhat over the life of the project with a number of articles published indicating the story of engagement in distance online study is evolving.

One other key problem which became evident as the literature review progressed was that much of the research was based on a policy or institutional agenda. Issues such as the impact of specific technology applications on student participation and changes in learning outcomes were central to the research, whereas this investigation, aimed to provide voice to the students' experiences.

⁷ Also termed the K-12 sector.

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Further, the selection of literature is also based on implicit cultural decisions and the pragmatics of my situation. However, while this may be perceived as a minor issue, I would like to make these constraints explicit.

Firstly, language was a significant factor in uncovering relevant literature. Much quality research has been undertaken in fields relevant to this investigation in non-English speaking countries. I was only able to access this work if it had been translated into English. This means that books, articles, conference papers and reports etc. published in, for example German, French, Spanish and Dutch that have not been translated into English were not considered in the literature review.

Secondly, with the majority of research output now held on various databases, those outputs which are not on accessible databases or for which I was unable to obtain hardcopy, are not represented.

1.8 Dissertation structure

While this report adheres to the traditional form of a doctoral dissertation, on reflection it might have been constructed in hypertext, so that the multitude of connections might be more obvious and reflect more clearly the structure of the investigation outcomes. However, this would have made a reading of the text far too confusing. The alternate structure, using each of the three research sub-questions as the focus of chapters five, six and seven, allows a structured and sequential presentation and analysis of data. Data which are part of the analysis in more than one chapter provide a link between the three research sub-questions and underline the connections.

Chapter Two divides the research literature into broad categories of engagement, educational technology/online study and distance education (including social presence).

The methodological framework for data analysis used in Chapter Three is van Manen's (1990) researching lived experience. It posits four lifeworlds: spatiality, temporality, corporeality and relationality which "may be seen to belong to the existential ground by way of which all human beings experience the world" ...[and] ... comprise "the fundamental structures of the lifeworld." (van Manen, 1990, p. 102).

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Next, I introduce the participants in Chapter Four. As Connor (one of the participant tutors) pointed out; students run the risk of being seen, and treated as *a message on a screen, a statistical outcome, not a person*. To avoid this, this chapter aims to associate a person with the voice you will hear in subsequent chapters.

With engagement being the pivotal concept of this investigation, Chapter Five is committed to exploring *Students' Understanding of Their Experiences of Engagement*. Students' views of engagement through their own words are considered within the framework of van Manen's (1990) four existentials. Chapter Six *Impact of Educational Technologies on Student Engagement* aims to capture participants' responses to technologies they employ for the purpose of studying online. Technology serves to provide the significant portion of the environment (although not all) within which the participant students interact with tutors and each other.

It would be unwise, if not impossible to truly represent the student voice without reference to significant others in the student's world of study. *Influences of Tutor Attitudes on Student Engagement* (Chapter Seven) canvasses tutor perceptions of student engagement and the impact of technology on the relationship. While there is considerable and ongoing reference to the tutors and what they perceive, it needs to be emphasised again that it is the student participants who were the focus. However, tutors, in their online role directly impact students' online study through, for example, unit design, teaching, personal support and professional insights.

Finally, in Chapter Eight, *Review, Contributions and Conclusions*, I draw together the themes which arose from the participant students and tutors regarding student engagement, and the phenomenon which is online study in the distance mode. In this chapter, I have purposely related the key findings of the investigation to the conclusions which are drawn to demonstrate the uniqueness of the participants' experiences and the context in which they were situated.

1.9 Conclusion

Students experience engagement in many ways and describe it in terms which are forged in their lifeworld. However the uniqueness of the expression of their experience does not disguise the

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similarities of their experiences. This dissertation aims to foreground these similarities, explore their meanings and highlight insights to better understand student engagement within the unique context of distance online study.

What follows is a story of real, not average, people who, while apparently disembodied and remote from their tutors and peers, use technology to develop innovative ways to engage with their study, their peers and their tutors. The ways they find to engage are not necessarily elegant, but in their sheer pragmatic resourcefulness, compellingly interesting.

Chapter Two: Literature Review

2.1 Introduction

This investigation is concerned with a specific group of students' perceptions of their engagement with their studies (which includes not only with course work, but also peers, tutors and institution) with a particular focus on the role and impact of their use of technology. The research design of this investigation is informed by a combination of areas of literature which include:

- i. an understanding of student engagement as a *meta concept* (Kahu, 2013);
- ii. online learning, particularly the impact of educational technology on engagement;
- iii. distance education and social presence; and
- iv. tutor impacts on student engagement within distance/online education as a mode of study.

In this chapter I navigate the research literature from each of these four areas which is relevant to the research questions. These areas are neither discrete nor independent of each other; however, they are able to be partially differentiated to make the review of literature manageable and relevant to the context within which the investigation was undertaken.

2.2 Student engagement: Terms and definitions

Definitions and understandings of student engagement in the literature are overwhelmingly anchored to concepts constructed by researchers. While the input of students through survey, interview and/or focus group, is central to many conceptual models of engagement, the familiarity of the term for students and indeed many staff, is variable, for example, as Ratcliffe and Dimmock (2013) attest from a United Kingdom perspective "the term itself is not widely used, or immediately recognised by the majority of students at Exeter" (p. 66). In general, as Ratcliffe and Dimmock (2013) put it: "The term [engagement] carries far more meaning with administrative staff than it does with students (or indeed with many academic teaching staff)" (p. 66). Even as it changes the focus from researcher-based definitions to student understandings, the investigation reported here will support

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this position with regard to participants' lack of recognition of the term. The beginning of the literature review canvasses a range of definitions of student engagement to provide a context for the investigation. However, with this dissertation addressing the perceptions of engagement of a group of Australian higher education students, Australian definitions form the focus.

In Australia, the Australian Council for Educational Research (ACER), developers of the Australasian Survey of Student Engagement (AUSSE), use the following definition of engagement: "students' involvement with activities and conditions likely to generate high-quality learning" (ACER 2009, p. 3) to underpin their survey design. Earlier Coates and Hillman (2008) provided a broader view:

Fundamentally, engagement is based on the assumption that learning is influenced by how an individual participates in educationally purposeful activities. While students are seen to be responsible for constructing their knowledge, learning is also seen to depend on institutions and staff generating conditions that stimulate and encourage student involvement. (p. 4)

The continuing importance of the concept of student engagement for researchers and managers of higher education institutions, and government policy specialists, is evidenced by the recent appearance of new edited collections of papers (Dunne & Derfel, 2013; Christenson, Reschly & Wylie, 2012) and conferences (for example the Australian Council for Educational Research 2013 National Student Engagement Forum). However, even at a time of great interest in student engagement, problems of a lack of agreement regarding definitions between researchers and across sectors and disciplines; and a lack of recognition and ownership of the term by students hamper progress in understanding how engagement impacts students.

Student engagement in the school (Foundation-12) sector

Depending on the context within which student engagement is being studied, definitions of the concept vary, reflecting differing approaches to the topic as well as differing research priorities. For example, Christenson, Reschly and Wylie (2012) focus on the United States school sector where they

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assert that student engagement “is considered as the primary theoretical model for understanding dropout and promoting school completion” (p. v). Other researchers within that sector view student engagement as a “meta-construct with two to four dimensions of internal thoughts and/or feelings as well as external behaviors (sic)” (Sharkey, You & Schoebelen, 2008, p. 402). Elsewhere in the Foundation – 12 sector in the United States, the meta-construct of engagement commenced with three dimensions (Jimerson, Campos, & Greif, 2003) which in later literature became “five factors: Affective Engagement-Liking for Learning, Affective Engagement-Liking for School, Behavioral Engagement-Effort & Persistence, Behavioral Engagement-Extracurricular, and Cognitive Engagement” (Hart, Stewart, & Jimerson, 2011, p. 67). Student engagement in this context comprises two observable (academic and behaviour) and two internal factors (cognitive and psychological) (Sinclair, Christenson, Lehr, & Anderson, 2003). That this Foundation-12 sector perspective is limited by its lack of agreed definitions and inconsistencies in measurement has been noted by Betts, Appleton, Reschly and Christenson (2010) who contend that the validation of the Student Engagement Instrument (SEI) which is an instrument used to measure student engagement in the Foundation-12 sector, may clarify these issues.

It appears that the multidimensional nature of student engagement has resulted in a range of definitions being used, making it a contested concept. For example, researchers may focus on only one component (unidimensional approach) or mix elements of several components (mixed approach), nonetheless operationalising the definition as “student engagement” (Hart, Stewart, & Jimerson, 2011, p. 68). An important aspect of this schools-based research is that it has tended to differentiate between:

Indicators of engagement that convey a student’s degree or level of connection with school and learning, such as attendance patterns, accrual of credits, and problem behavior, ... [and] ... *facilitators of engagement [which]* are contextual factors that influence the strength of the connection, such as school discipline practices,

parental supervision of homework completion, and peer attitudes toward academic accomplishment. (Appleton, Christenson & Furlong, 2008, p. 382)

This dualism in student engagement research has been portrayed by Heller, Beil, Dam and Haerum (2010), as a focus on process and/or outcome.

Within this sector, the type and level of student engagement may be influenced by a range of contextual parameters including ethnicity (Bingham & Okagaki, 2012), disability (Richardson, Long & Foster, 2004), family, school and peers (Reschly & Christensen, 2006) and peers (Juvonen, Espinoza & Knifsend, 2012). However, there is overall agreement that “the role of context cannot be ignored. Engagement is not conceptualised as an attribute of the student but rather as an alterable state of being” (Christenson, Reschly & Wylie, 2012, p. v). As such, these parameters are subject to investigation in terms of both their impact on student engagement and identifying and evaluating interventions which might mitigate their impact on engagement.

Student engagement within higher education

The breadth of the higher education environment has also led to definitional issues similar to those outlined for K-12. For example, from a United Kingdom perspective, Trowler (2013) defines engagement as “the investment of time, effort and other relevant resources by both students and their institutions intended to optimise the student experience and enhance the learning outcomes and development of students, and the performance and reputation of the institution” (p. 91).

However, within this sector student engagement has also been referred to as having a range of variously described dimensions. For example Solomonides (2013) identified four dimensions: “behavioural, cognitive, affective and socio-cultural” (p. 44). For him, the behavioural and cognitive dimensions have been characterised by “the National Survey of Student Engagement (NSSE) and its derivatives” (p. 44). [In an Australian context, this includes the AUSSE.] With no widely recognised equivalent survey relating to the affective and social-cultural dimensions currently in use, there is an imbalance in the discussion of the dimensions in the literature.

An alternate way of viewing student engagement in Australian universities has been provided by Pittaway (2012), who developed a framework for understanding student engagement to assist staff development. Its aim was to “enhance unit design and development, teaching practice, and student support practices” (Pittaway, 2012, p. 37). It comprised five elements: personal (students’ responsibilities in relation to being engaged); academic (students applying academic skills to their studies); intellectual (engagement with ideas and disciplinary thinking); social (developing meaningful relationships with other students); and professional (making connections into the profession which the student is preparing to enter). This developing framework is aimed at creating an understanding of student engagement influencing practical outcomes within the teaching context, rather than providing a research structure. Its importance is closely aligned to the clarity of focus it provides to improve student learning outcomes.

In an attempt to provide some structure to the range of research approaches to student engagement in higher education Kahu (2013) identified four dominant research perspectives relating to student engagement, summarised as:

- *behavioural* – an emphasis on student behaviour and teaching (including institutional) practice, but not including the student thinking and emotions behind their behaviour.
- *psychological* – engagement is viewed as a psycho-social process which includes a number of dimensions such as behavioural (paralleling aspects of the behavioural perspective), cognition, emotion and conation. It also distinguishes between engagement and its antecedents (that is those conditions that pre-exist and impact engagement).
- *socio-cultural* – focuses on the impact of the broader social context of students’ engagement experience . In this perspective alienation is identified as the polar opposite of engagement (Mann, 2001). Contextual factors such as performativity (focussing only on student performance), academic culture (the impact of cultural difference between the academic and outside worlds) and cultural bias within institutions are identified as impacting the student experience and hence engagement.

- *holistic* – a more recent perspective which argues for a broader view of engagement than just the successful gaining of qualifications. Engagement is seen as “a dynamic continuum with different locations (task, classroom, course, institution), and thus not measurable by surveys but best understood through in-depth qualitative work” (Kahu, 2013, p. 764).

Kahu’s review (2013) led her to develop her own complex conceptual framework of student engagement to overcome shortcomings which she identified in current research and policy. These shortcomings include the: “debate over the exact nature of the construct; [and] a lack of distinction between the state of engagement, its antecedents and its consequences⁸” (ibid, p. 1). Her framework of student engagement placed students and three dimensions of their engagement – affect, cognition and behaviour at its centre. Impacting student engagement are psycho-social influences (variables within the control of the student), for example, background, support, motivation and skills; and structural influences (including university variables), for example, policies, curriculum, teaching and support. Consequences of these influences on student engagement, both proximal and distal, were identified in terms of academic and social, but embedded in the socio-cultural context:

By depicting the complex array of factors influencing a student’s engagement, and by embedding these phenomena and processes within the wider socio-cultural context, the unique nature of the individual experience becomes clearer and the need for in-depth study of particular student populations self-evident. (ibid, p. 9)

Another view of engagement has been provided by Zepke and Leach (2010) who, in investigating soft outcomes (those not necessarily able to be quantified), developed what they term a ‘conceptual organiser’ for student engagement. They too argued that the concept of engagement is complex with an increasing number of definitions and factors being identified and analysed. The

⁸ In an attempt to bridge the gap between research and practice, Harris (2011) noted that Finn (1993) added this further level of differentiation. The distinction was made between indicators of engagement (for example attendance patterns or problem behaviour) and facilitators of engagement (for example approaches to discipline and parental attitudes). Finn (2006) explained that facilitators of engagement had implications for intervention practice and policies, while indicators could be used to guide identification procedures and changes of outcomes.

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conceptual organiser identified four perspectives, or lenses, for the study of engagement: *student motivation and agency* – that arising from the student; in the classroom – placing “teaching and teachers at the heart of engagement” (p. 664); *socio-political context* (which refers to the student learning and addresses the broad political and cultural context within which learning and knowledge lie); and the impact of factors such as *family background* and *socio-economic status*.

Subsequently Leach and Zepke (2011) more formally reviewed their conceptual organiser to posit four perspectives in student engagement research: *motivation and agency* (intrinsic to the students); *transactional engagement* (students engaging with each other, tutors and significant others); *institutional support* (providing a suitable learning environment); and *active citizenship* (students and institutions working together). Following their own research, they revised their list to add *non-institutional support* (students supported by family and friends).

Depending on the context in which they are used, the approaches of both Kahu (2013) [categorising research perspectives in the study of student engagement], and Leach and Zepke (2011) [an “organiser that would help teachers in higher education to plan for, create and evaluate conditions for student engagement”, p. 194] are useful. However, Leach and Zepke’s work is of additional significance to this investigation in that it emphasises the importance of *transactional engagement* that is engagement between students, and between students and tutors; and also emphasises the need for a higher profile for non-institutional factors in investigating student engagement.

In an effort to simplify the range of definitions and research perspectives relating to student engagement, Case (2008) identified two major theoretical perspectives. The first is *approaches to learning* - grounded in cognitive psychology and linking improving the student (learning) experience to psychometrically derived benchmarks (behavioural and psychological). This perspective is similar to Kahu’s (2013) behavioural and psychological categories. The second is *socio-cultural* – those aspects which surround the student in the non-classroom environment and impact their engagement. This perspective subsumes Kahu’s socio-cultural and holistic categories. Such a simplification of the wide

range of definitions and research perspectives provides a useful starting point and way of managing an in-depth investigation of the literature which is most relevant to student engagement in higher education.

2.2.1 Behavioural perspective

The behavioural perspective of student engagement, that is a focus on student behaviour and teaching practice, has dominated the literature (Solomonides, 2013; Leach & Zepke, 2011) necessitating a closer examination of its conceptual structure. Whilst this perspective has merit in and of itself, its dominance in the literature has arisen both from its longevity and the fact that the high profile main research tool in the area of student engagement, the National Survey of Student Engagement (NSSE), has been developed from early forms of this research.

Underpinning research from the behavioural perspective, is the concept of engagement and the related concepts of involvement (Astin, 1984) and integration (Tinto, 1993), which arose from work on retention in higher education, undertaken in the 1970s in the United States of America (USA). Their inter-relatedness is based on the idea of developing in students, certain approaches to learning which lead to successful learning outcomes. Subsequently, this has been thought to encourage institutional commitment in the students which will lead to a reduction in student attrition rates and an improvement in overall education attainment. Through the use of these concepts, researchers have sought to identify success and progression indicators which lead to positive and purposeful academic and social outcomes for students (Wolf-Wendel, Ward & Kinzie, 2009).

Wolf-Wendal, Ward and Kinzie (2009) highlighted the inter-relatedness of these three concepts (involvement, integration and engagement) and broadly described them as follows:

- Increased *involvement* of students in academic, community-oriented and social on-campus activities, will improve their chances of success. Other factors may include time spent in (productive) study, time doing homework and the number of questions asked by students both during and outside class.

- The degree to which students come to identify with the higher education institution and take on its values and processes, potentially resulting in their increased institutional commitment, is the degree to which they have *integrated*.
- The degree to which students take part in and show some commitment towards campus activities and processes is seen as an indicator of *engagement*. This concept includes academic and non-academic campus activities and directly gave rise to the National Survey of Student Engagement (NSSE) in the United States.

These concepts are still highly influential in the literature, because the behavioural approach is central to the development of the NSSE (Wolf-Wendel, Ward & Kinzie, 2009), and the Australian version, the Australasian Survey of Student Engagement (AUSSE) (Coates & Hillman, 2008).

The NSSE, developed to measure student engagement in the institutional context for sectoral comparisons, was based on Kuh's (2001) research. The instrument includes five broadly accepted benchmarks of engagement, described by Harper and Quaye (2009) as:

- 1 Level of academic challenge: Working hard to meet professors' expectations, analysing and synthesising ideas, applying theories and course concepts to practical situations, studying and academic preparation activities, and composing papers of various length. (*sic*)
- 2 Active and collaborative learning: Asking questions and contributing to class discussions, making class presentations, working with peers on projects during class, collaborating with classmates outside of class to prepare assignments, participating in community-based projects as part of class activities, and discussing ideas from readings or course concepts with others outside class.
- 3 Student-faculty interaction: Talking through career plans with professors and advisors, discussing ideas from readings or assignments with faculty outside of class, collaborating with faculty on committees and assorted campus activities, and working on research projects with professors.

- 4 Enriching educational experiences: Interacting across difference, taking foreign language courses, completing a culminating senior year experience (e.g. a senior thesis), and participating in a range of value-added activities, including student organisations and campus events, community service or volunteer work, study abroad programs, internships, faculty-supervised independent study experiences, and learning communities.
- 5 Supportive campus environment: Students' perceptions of the support needed to succeed academically, thrive socially, and cope with non-academic matters, as well as the self-reported quality of relationships with other students, faculty, administrators, and staff at the institution.

(p. 5-6)

Within the Australian context, the Australian Council for Educational Research (ACER) developed the AUSSE with a purpose similar to the NSSE. To emphasise the importance of learning outcomes, ACER re-focussed the definition of engagement to: "students' involvement with activities and conditions likely to generate high-quality learning" (ACER, 2009, p. 3) – a definition that has been widely cited in the Australasian literature on student engagement, for example Hagel, Carr and Devlin (2012); Leach and Zepke (2011); and Coates (2006). This definition led to the identification of six criteria (see Table 2.1) used in instrument development, in its various forms of undergraduate (UG), postgraduate (PG) and staff/student (SS) Engagement Questionnaires. These instruments have been available to Australian and New Zealand universities since 2007 (ACER, 2009) and have been used to provide evidence for policy decisions and development at institutional and national levels.

Table 1

Criteria of Engagement (ACER, 2007)

1. Active learning	Students' effort to actively construct their knowledge
2. Academic challenge	Extent to which expectations and assessments challenge students to learn
3. Student and staff interactions	Level and nature of students' contact with teaching staff
4. Enriching educational experiences	Participation in broadening educational activities
5. Supportive learning environment	Feelings of legitimation within the university community
6. Work integrated learning	Integration of employment-focussed work experiences into study

Recently Kahu, Stephens, Leach and Zepke, (2013) analysed results of the AUSSE administered at Massey University in New Zealand, and found that for criteria one to five, the level of engagement for students aged 25 years and over (which comprise the majority of distance education students) was similar to that of younger students. However, it is only on the sixth criteria, 'work integrated learning', that distance students rate significantly higher than on-campus students. One caveat on these findings is that part of their analysis incorporated the use of an untested statistical process to adjust the results for hours of study. The authors argued that this adjustment was important as "While not a perfect method of adjustment, it is the best available and is necessary as the scores would reflect poorly on part-time students if left unadjusted" (Kahu, Stephens, Leach & Zepke, 2013, p. 794). However using such untested statistical processes created questions as to the meaning, generalisability and reliability of the results. Similarly, given the sampling technique used, and the higher rates of response from female, young, and on-campus students, the results from such surveys more appropriately inform institutional level understandings and actions rather than unit or student levels. Such outcomes lead to the proposition that the large-scale survey instruments are important for broad policy work but less useful in understanding how individuals or smaller groups of students engage (Solomonides, 2013).

A less structured approach to engagement has been argued by Zepke and Leach (2010) who claim that there has been too great a focus on hard outcomes such as retention, completion and employment at the expense of, what they term, soft outcomes such as "the distance travelled by learners towards programme goals rather than their final achievement" (p. 663). As a result they have drawn upon "'soft' outcomes and 'engagement' literatures to rethink and synthesise student success using their experiences of learning" (p. 662). The Zepke and Leach study is relevant to the current investigation in that, while it focused on foundation learners rather than distance online students, it highlighted the importance of using qualitative data in gaining a more complete picture of student achievements (including engagement) aside from learning outcomes.

Overall, a detailed review of the implementation of the AUSSE by Hagel, Carr and Devlin (2012) reinforced some of the misgivings outlined above:

It seems that by borrowing its student engagement scales from the USA, Australia has adopted a conception of student engagement and a measurement instrument that fails to capture some important aspects of engagement. There are contextual differences between the higher education systems of the two countries that raise questions about how well the scales apply to undergraduate students currently attending Australian universities. (p. 484)

The AUSSE is not the only survey instrument focussing on engagement which has been used in Australian universities. The First Year Experience Questionnaire (FYEQ) was first administered to a cohort of campus-based students in 2004 (Krause & Coates, 2008). Whilst this research was based on on-campus students, a brief review of the “dimensions” (p. 5) which have been drawn from their data in addition to data from previous surveys of first year student experience (McInnis & James, 1995; McInnis, James & Hartley, 2000), informs a view of engagement pertinent to this study due to the range of different scales of engagement it used, particularly the Online Engagement Scale and the Beyond Class Engagement Scale. Their analysis addressed the seven scales which were developed psychometrically from the data:

1. Transition Engagement Scale (TES)
 - Evaluates the success of orientation program in connecting first year students with support people and processes;
 - Support for course advice and decision making;
 - Focus on student identity and whether expectations are met.
2. Academic Engagement Scale (AES)
 - Focus on self-awareness and agency.
3. Peer Engagement Scale (PES)
 - Developing knowledge in collaboration with peers.

4. Student–staff Engagement Scale (SES)
 - Student perceptions of the interest of tutors for example through empathy;
 - How tutors provide feedback.
5. Intellectual Engagement Scale (IES)
 - The challenge to learn and form a meaningful commitment to study;
 - Motivation to study.
6. Online Engagement Scale (OES)
 - Use of the web and computer software to support access to resources;
 - The role of ICT to promote independent and self-initiated learning;
 - Using ICT to communicate and build community.
7. Beyond-class Engagement Scale (BES)
 - Extracurricular involvement;
 - Sense of belonging and social connectedness beyond the classroom.

Significantly for this study, the authors raised the question “whether engagement with ICTs should be viewed as a form of engagement in and of itself [...] nevertheless, the fact that the scale mean for the OES [...] behaves so differently from the rest points to the fact that further work is needed to refine our understanding of how students engage online in the first year” (Krause & Coates, 2008, p. 502). The issue of understanding how students engage online relates to all years.

2.2.2 Socio-cultural approaches to student engagement

The second major research perspective informing the student engagement literature is the socio-cultural perspective which investigates the impact of broader socio-cultural influences on engagement. While this perspective of engagement is most usually interpreted as a focus on societally-based influences, a particular interest has developed in the manner in which the social and cultural bias of the institution impacts student engagement (Thomas, 2002). More broadly, in discussing the societal issues impacting student engagement, McInnis (2001) referred to a number of components, including work/career, family and non-university social interests, as changing the

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relationship between student study and institution. He pointed out: “efforts to improve or change levels of student commitment to university should not be based on the assumption that the value of student identity that comes from engagement with the university experience is a self-evident good” (p. 8). On the basis of these changing relationships he posited a move to a position of “negotiated engagement” (p. 8) between the student and institution; in this case, engagement is not set, but subject to changes in students’ needs.

Unlike the behavioural perspective, in which the identification and measurement of factors, scales or benchmarks comprise engagement, Anderson, Christenson, Sinclair and Lehr (2004) developed the idea of an engagement continuum with full engagement at one end, and disengagement at the other. They contended that the use of a continuum avoids the all or nothing approach and allows students to be engaged to differing degrees with respect to different parameters. In the extreme case, students who are fully disengaged and who drop out are seen to be demonstrating an extreme sense of alienation (Bryson & Hand, 2007). Alienation has also been used as a concept to study engagement in postgraduate students in professional courses (Bezuidenhout, Cilliers, Van Heusden, Wasserman & Burch, 2011) or school (Archer, Hollingworth, & Halsall, 2007). With a definitional realignment towards a more contextually sensitive understanding of engagement, this move away from identifying factors to thinking of engagement in an holistic way provides more flexibility in applying to the cohort in this investigation.

Whilst the use of the concept of alienation as an explanation of disengagement may appear extreme, Kahu (2013) argued convincingly that many students new to higher education experience confusion and struggle with university culture. Thomas (2002) argued forcibly that Bourdieu’s “institutional habitus” (p. 430), that is “a set of dispositions created and shaped by the interactions between objective structures and personal histories, including experiences and understanding of ‘reality’” (p. 430) needs to be considered in understanding student retention. The implications for this investigation are that distance online students, potentially with a negative experience of school education and/or little family history with universities, might find it difficult to even understand

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what is happening at university particularly when they are remote from campus and therefore missing many of the cultural clues and influences available to on-campus students. Forsyth and Furlong (2003) found that even for face-to-face students “the highest achievers, felt that they were now encountering barriers related to their social class and elitism” and “young people from disadvantaged backgrounds [became] trapped in a 'catch 22' situation, where they felt they could neither 'fit in' at home, nor at university” (p. 220).

Much of the work from socio-cultural perspective of student engagement has been influenced by Mann (2001) who outlined the possible relationship between alienation and disengagement. For her, alienation is a contested concept so she proposed:

seven different theoretical perspectives from which to view this possible experience of alienation. The first six perspectives examine the conditions under which alienation might arise, whereas the seventh explores alienation as a strategy of resistance adopted in order to preserve a sense of self (p. 8).

That is to say, each of the theoretical perspectives of alienation could shed light on the understanding of the experience of the student in higher education. Mann (2001) argued that in considering disengagement in terms of alienation we move the focus from learning to a “focus on alienated or engaged experiences of learning” (p. 17). From such a position, questions have arisen as to the inevitability of disengagement and the possibility of reducing it, thereby increasing student engagement; and if this is possible, what actions would be required of tutors and institutions in addressing the imbalance of power.

The socio-cultural perspective of student engagement is less structured and under-investigated compared with the behavioural perspective, and privileges qualitative research methods. The breadth of this theoretical approach includes the possibility of investigating possible interplay of non-campus influences on the disengagement of students. For example, Vaccaro and Lovell (2010) found that while family could be “a greedy institution, kin also serve as a source of educational inspiration for women” (p. 161). With this in mind, Case (2008) and Case, Marshall and Linder, (2010) used Mann’s

seven theoretical perspectives to develop three quasi-chronological stages of student progress through their higher education:

- entering the higher education community;
- fitting into the higher education community; and
- staying in the higher education community.

The reasons for disengagement from the institution may vary as the student makes his/her journey through the study program, and different non-institutional influences may work with or against institutional influences to impact students and their engagement and progression. Soft outcomes (Zepke & Leach, 2010) can also result from non-institutional influences, acting on the transition through these stages. For distance online students, these stages may have different meanings from those held by on-campus students and the impact of technology on the lived experience of each could be markedly different.

2.3 Staff perceptions of student engagement

Research into student engagement has become increasingly detailed and nuanced, with a shift more recently in focus from the student to their teachers informing understandings. For example Heller, Beil, Dam and Haerum (2010) argued that there are significant differences in the perception of engagement between students and tutors. They found that whilst tutors most often saw engagement as a student responsibility, many tutors recognised their role in creating the environment that generated engagement, but did not encourage students' commodification of engagement, which occurs when students see engagement as an experience which is provided *to* them.

In a similar manner van der Velden (2013) highlighted the potential tensions between staff and students when staff conceptualise student engagement as a collegial or collaborative effort, but believe students see engagement in a consumerist light – “an inversion of the responsibility for academic success from the student onto their teachers” (p. 79). Kahu (2013) interpreted it from another perspective: “while tutors see engagement as cognitive, students see it as predominantly affective” (p. 760). To some extent this was borne out by Russell and Slater (2011) who found that

distance students were very positive regarding the opportunity to merely meet with tutors. The meeting provided these students with the opportunity to not only cognitively engage, but more importantly for the students, it improved the quality of his/her transactional relationship (that is the negotiated constructive interactions) with tutors and peers. The authors identified that the “student’s experience reinforces the critical importance of transactional engagement, especially between teachers and learners, even when those learners are apparently autonomous, competent and highly motivated” (p. 8). It is within transactional engagement that students make connections with their tutors, and their tutor perceptions impact on this connection.

2.4 Educational technology/online learning and teaching in higher education

2.4.1 Background

The evolving role of educational technology, particularly through online learning, has commanded interest in the literature. Understanding the effective and appropriate use of ICT in teaching and learning has been identified as one of the major issues confronting higher education around the world (Bonk, 2004). Views in this area range from the unbridled optimism of Iiyoshi and Kumar (2008) to the scepticism of Cuban (2001). Peters (2003) characterised the way in which technology is viewed in education by proposing a continuum: at one end he identified the engineering tradition (where technology *has* a good and positive value), at the other end he saw the humanities tradition (where technology is *interpreted* more broadly in relation to culture and history).

The annual EDUCAUSE Center for Applied Research (ECAR) Survey (Salaway, Caruso & Nelson, 2007; 2008) implemented in the USA, reports authored in Australia (Moyle & Owen, 2009; Moyle, 2010), along with an increasing number of (e-)journals and web sites, evidence the increasing availability and use of ICT within higher education. More institutionally-specific university information available on the activities of

Australian students has supported the finding of increasing use of ICT in Australian higher education. For example Kennedy, Judd, Churchward, Gray and Krause (2008) found high levels of access to, and use, of ICT by Melbourne University students, and Eijkman and Herrmann (2009) reported on the increased use of ICT by University of New South Wales students studying at the Australian Defence Force Academy. These institutional level studies mainly attempted to understand the student availability of ICT and the extent of its use.

2.4.2 Researching technologies

Along with their increasing ubiquity, the use of ICT in education are becoming more sophisticated (Committee of Inquiry into the impact on higher education of students' widespread use of Web 2.0 technologies, 2009). Increasing sophistication of ICT in higher education is driven by two factors. Firstly, the use of large complex software such as learning platforms – Learning Management Systems (Australia), Course Management Systems (US) or Virtual Learning Environments (UK). Secondly the use of a wide range of web 2.0 technologies (Conole, de Laat, & Darby, 2006). For example:

- Karasavvidis (2010); Neumann and Hood (2009); Wei-Ying, Hyo-Jeong and Seng-Chee (2010), describe in positive terms, projects involving the specific uses of blogs and wikis;
- Goodyear, Jones, Asensio, Hodgson and Steeples (2005), also found generally positive outcomes from students' experiences of network learning which were stable over the length of the course but varied depending on the level of integration of the computer mediated conferencing (CMC) into the networked learning course.

Studies of this type have reinforced the richness of the range of applications from which students, if not tutors, can choose, and the rate at which the options change.

Early research into online study focused mainly on the formal learning technologies such as LMS being used in structured, formal ways. However the inventiveness of students, and in some cases tutors, has realigned some of the learning activities with informal learning or social

applications. Using a series of surveys and interviews Goodwin, Kennedy and Vetere (2010) found that students tended to choose how they used available technologies according to social relations and may choose not to use certain institutionally provided technologies because of their associated technical and social protocols.

The past decade has seen considerable increase in the range of new technologies applied to the education environment. Over that time, the majority of technology-focussed research has studied the impact of a specific technology on students and/or their learning outcomes. Specific examples include:

- Software - Web 2.0 and social software such as wikis in graduate level courses (Huang & Nakazawa, 2010); proprietary social software such as Flickr and Google used in a controlled educational environments (Dron, 2007); mapping technology landscapes such as MySpace and Facebook for use by young learners (Clark, Logan, Luckin, Mee & Oliver, 2009); and
- Learning Management Systems/systems management/learning analytics (Casquero, Portillo, Ovelar, Benito & Romo, 2010); data mining⁹ of LMS (Phillips, Maor, Cumming-Potvin, Roberts, Herrington, Preston & Moore, 2011).

These studies are clearly focussed on technology and its impact on learning outcomes and processes rather than the people using the technology and their relationships with it and other people. Even when the impact on individuals (the 'users') is raised, the individuals are typified as receivers using functionalist tools, rather than engaging with the technologies (Friesen, 2011).

2.4.3 Technologies and student engagement

A number of more recent studies relating to the use of ICT in learning and under the umbrella of student engagement have been canvassed during this investigation. Some of these studies focussed on specific technologies; for example Wood and Ashfield (2008) used a case study approach to identify the impact of whiteboard use on literacy and mathematics; Beer, Clark and Jones (2010) demonstrated how data mining from LMS might be used to improve student engagement; whilst

⁹ This process, more specifically called learning analytics in the educational context, plots students' online pathways and times.

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Dawson, Macfadyen and Lockyer (2009) argued that analysing patterns of online learning behaviour data mined from the institutional LMS, can improve students' achievement orientation.

Other studies have focussed on the impact of ICT on student engagement across various disciplines. Beard, Wilson and McCarter (2007), for example, provided an overview of the benefits of implementing ICT in hospitality and leisure disciplines; whilst Brint, Cantwell, and Hannemann (2008) analysed data from the University of California's Undergraduate Experience Survey (UCUES) to identify different levels of engagement between humanities and social sciences "interaction, participation and interest in ideas" (p. 383) and natural sciences students "quantitative skills through collaborative study with an eye to rewards in the labor market" (p. 383). Feeny, Reynolds, Eaton and Harper (2008) drew on a range of current practices to describe the possible uses of ICT in dental education, and argued that the use of ICT could improve outcomes in dentistry training. While these discipline-based studies can provide pedagogically oriented findings to improve learning outcomes in their respective disciplines, they do not provide information regarding the perceptions of the students.

Although the use of technology has been promoted by higher education institutions as improving flexibility of time and place for students, particularly mature aged, part-time and distance students (Bonk, 2004), there is little available research literature regarding specific institutionally-focussed outcomes. Specifically with regard to higher education Kahu, Stephens, Zepke and Leach (2014) contended that technology does not necessarily make time and space more flexible, but rather changes the nature of the constraints which are placed upon the distance online home user. Further, whilst focusing on people working at home, Kaufman-Scarborough (2006) raised some significant issues in relation to work/life balance and the management of work/time/space at home. She distinguished between the dedicated workspace office and the "temporary space that 'becomes' an office when needed" (p. 58) and examined the "intra-household time interactions that result when workspaces are integrated within the home spaces" (p. 57). She also suggested that the management of each of these options and the differences between them, might impact the household in general

and the quality of the work output from the office. With potential similarities between students studying at home and people working at home, these constructs provided valuable insights for this investigation.

Of interest to this research, there have been a number of studies that have looked at the role or impact of the use of ICT in online initial teacher education. For example Rasmussen and Ludvigsen (2009), examined how educational practices changed in response to ICT reform and argued that more importance be placed on the consequences of using ICT to reform pedagogy. Dempsey, Arthur-Kelly and Carty (2009) identified possible positive outcomes from improving ICT support to initial special education teachers; and So and Kim (2009) studied development of initial teacher skills in the application of technologies to their teaching. There is a growing understanding that technology is not neutral and its utilisation has brought intended or unintended change (Herrmann, Fox & Boyd, 2000).

Researchers have also investigated belief systems, attitudes and skills of tutors teaching with technology, in order to provide insights into the impact through them of technology on their students. Hermans, Tondeur, Braak and Valcke (2008) found that teachers' educational beliefs are significant determinants in explaining why teachers adopt computers in classrooms and the way this might impact their course and materials design, and their pedagogy. A relationship has also been identified between positive teacher attitudes to technology and its integration in classrooms in Cyprus (Liu, 2011). Martin and Vallance (2008) found that initial teacher education students moved to more constructivist strategies for teaching after being involved in the development and implementation of synchronous networked tasks. The recognition that belief, skills and attitudes of tutors impact their use of technology is an important step in moving away from a purely objectivist/functionalist view of technology.

As a cautionary note, the research literature relating to the use of technology in education has on a number of occasions used the term engagement quite generally, that is, in an informal literary manner lacking clear definition. In this context an OED-like definition may be inferred by the reader, but there is often no specific reference point. For example, Iiyoshi and Kumar 2008; Wei-Ying, Hyo-

Jeong and Seng-Chee 2010; Karasavvidas 2010; and Shen, Hilz and Bieber 2006 used the term engagement to imply some general connection between the student, their use of ICT, observed enthusiasm for, or enjoyment of the technology and student learning, without necessarily detailing the specifics of the relationship as causal or co-relational. In another case, Godejord (2007) wrote of engagement in terms of students becoming involved both “emotionally and practically in the field of social informatics” (p. 447) without reference as to what factors evidence this involvement. These uses of the term engagement serve to confuse the research literature and weaken the use of the term elsewhere.

2.4.4 Student perspectives

This category of literature points to the significant impact technology has on teaching and learning processes and how students and tutors engage. By way of example, Wopereis, Sloep and Poortman (2010) reported positive outcomes from a small class project using questionnaires, interviews and weblog analysis to study the utility of weblogs for structured reflective writing and providing feedback. However, in the main these studies reside at an institutional or policy level. Mayes (2006), recognised this and highlighted that “The literature review undertaken by the scoping study [for the LEX Methodology Report] indicates that the majority of e-learning research is written from a practitioner’s perspective, with only a small minority allowing the learner’s voice to come through” (p. 3). In light of this finding, a sub-group of CLEX¹⁰ team members (Creanor, Trinder, Gowan & Howells, 2007-08) undertook a qualitative study of what 54 learners’ perceptions of the impact of technology on their lives and learning. Whilst their participant group did not include representation of initial teacher education students, nor fully distance students, a number of their outcomes are relevant to my investigation; specifically they identified four themes summarised as the:

1. ‘underworld’ of digital communication among learners;
2. increasing prevalence of informal learning through technology;

¹⁰ Committee of Inquiry into the impact on higher education of students’ widespread use of Web 2.0 technologies

3. extent of learner choice and control over technology, learning activities, and their learning environment;
4. emotional aspect of technology enhanced learning and its impact on confidence, self-esteem and motivation to learn. (p. 38)

They also pointed out: “as learners develop a more sophisticated view of e-learning, there continues to be a certain reluctance on the part of tutors and course designers to incorporate the level of flexibility and choice that new generations of learners are demanding” (p. 37). With students leading the way, so to speak, higher education is in a constant state of catch-up.

Whilst these themes point to a possible new direction for research, at this stage initial qualitative research would benefit from the clarification of the issues with respect to each theme; supporting a subtle change in the view of technology from an objectivist to a more relational perspective. Of particular relevance to this study is the ‘underworld’ of digital communications among students; the manner in which students communicate with their peers outside their learning management system and the ways in which the technology impacts their online identity and image.

Other lines of research giving voice to students can be found in recent hermeneutic phenomenology literature. Van Manen and Adams (2009), for example, reflected on the issues that accompany being part of an online course and having to write to people with whom there is no existing relationship; they also questioned how relationships develop in cyberspace. Friesen (2011) was interested in the way language is used in the new spaces which e-learning technologies open up for students and how this compares with the more traditional spaces of classroom; he questioned the implications for the way pedagogy is viewed in using different terms such as user, learner, person and student.

The simple act of asking for assistance with an ICT issue in a computer laboratory or elsewhere was elegantly unpacked by Tannis (2013). By analysing his own experience over the years of being asked for assistance with educational technologies by international students, he developed a new

understanding of the “importance of developing an ICT support and training structure that appreciates the inter-subjective, activity-embedded nature of ICT help seeking and giving” (p. 1).

Taking a broad definition of student, a study by Kraglund-Gauthier (2010) highlighted the needs of university tutors who are self-taught online educators. The author shared the journey of three education tutors who were professional development ‘students’ as, with the help of an instructional designer, they developed their skills and understanding of the online world to educate intending teachers. Much of what they learnt occurred as they worked and they became acutely aware of the support which they sought and gained from colleagues. From their experience as learners, the authors emphasised the importance of developing meaningful relationships in online courses as part of the necessary pedagogy, and continuing to evolve an understanding of what it means to teach online.

With the addition of the students’ perspective in such studies, new views of technology may be opened up, moving away from traditional objectivist assumptions. The aim of these studies is to a large extent practical in that they aim to uncover views, approaches and developments which might assist students to improve their relationships with technologies.

2.5 Development of online identity and image

The use of the terms/concepts identity and image in the context of an online environment became another potential point of interest as this investigation progressed. The issues of the (sometimes) conflicting roles of distance students – student, worker, parent, and - are not new (Herrmann, 1985), nor restricted to students studying in non-traditional settings (McInnis, 2001; Lowe & Gayle, 2007). Perriton and Reedy (2002) turn to feminist and anarchist literature to highlight the problems which arise in trying to control one’s identity within groups in general, but online learning groups in particular. For them, there needs to be awareness by the tutor and students of the “micro-political processes by which identity is being worked out both in relation to the teachers and students” (p. 7).

2.5.1 Professional identity

In the context of this investigation, online identity should not be confused with professional identity as outlined in Greenwood's (1957) seminal work "Attributes of a Profession", although the two are interwoven and impact each other in that students develop their professional identity as they progress through their course (Solomonides & Reid, 2009). The multidimensional model of student engagement developed by Solomonides (2013) involves a "sense of being a professional" [along with a] "sense of discipline knowledge" (p. 53) as critical to developing a sense of engagement. Solomonides and Reid (2009) have also suggested a relationship between student identity and engagement. They emphasised the connection between identity as a sense of being (confidence, happiness, imaginative and self-knowledge) and a sense of transformation (learning understanding and thinking), combined with sound pedagogic practices as central to a strong sense of engagement. They provided empirical evidence of this being the case for art and design students and suggested that it holds for other disciplines.

A similar impact has been identified for initial teacher education students. As Ylijoki (2000) pointed out: "Besides the common cognitive basis, disciplines have their own social and cultural characteristics: norms, values, modes of interaction, life-style, pedagogical and ethical codes etc." (p. 339). Part of the student developing as a professional is the assumption of these social and cultural characteristics.

With respect to this process of developing an identity as an initial teacher education student there were pragmatic problems. Moss (2004) noted in particular "the intense negotiations undertaken by women students in order to construct space and time for academic work" (p. 283) as a particular issue confronting them in their efforts to develop as students.

For distance online students the development of professional identity happens in conjunction or competition with the characteristics of students' other roles, for example parent, spouse and worker.

The complexity of the relationships between the various identities that students maintain, has been explained by Moss and Pittaway (2013) as the student identity being essentially a narrative, which "comprises a series of interrelated, overlapping "layers", which can be organised and configured to achieve temporary coherence in different ways, depending on context and time" (p. 1014). These tensions impact the meaning which students make of their experience.

For Henkel (2005) these "identities are, first and foremost, shaped and reinforced in and by strong and stable communities and the social processes generated within them" (p. 157). Kember, Lee and Li express this in a practical manner as "keep students as a cohort" (2001, p. 335). Continuing membership of a cohort built a stronger sense of belonging, increasing the opportunity for students to identify as not just students but as members of a community. Part-time students rarely move through a program within a stable cohort and enrolment patterns vary over semesters, so strong and stable communities are not easy to find. The positive nature of the learning community in its contribution to identity development was also found by Askham (2008). For online students with limited or no access to campus, these communities of discipline groups may appear to be an alien culture (Gallacher, Crossen, Field & Merrill, 2002).

2.5.2 Online identity and image

Another perspective of online identity is evident in the ICT literature focussing on young people in social media. Within this body of literature there appears to be no set definition for identity or image. The major themes that have emerged relate to the problems created for the young person when insufficient care is taken with the image which is broadcast on social media, particularly Facebook and other social networking sites, irrespective of

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whether or not they were used in formal teaching or informally by students. The confusion which arises when students do not think about the diversity of audience is also a concern. Hashim, Idrus, Ho-Abdullah, Yusof, Mydin and Hamdan (2013) provided a case study of students in a course taught using components of Facebook; for them, issues resulting from the use of real names and multiple Facebook accounts were critical to identity – I would refer to this as ‘image’. Doubts regarding the authenticity of the image arise when multiple names/accounts are used by individual students. Such problems as ‘friends’ being able to intervene in learning activities become critical when accounts are used for multiple purposes. These disruptions and ambiguities of image are eliminated to a large extent through the use of an institutional LMS.

Whilst Peluchette and Karl (2010) noted the possible differences between the image portrayed and the way in which people see themselves, their research identified problems which arose for students when online images/identities in social networking sites were not actively managed. Mixed messages are produced when social and formal, or professional (Jones & Swain, 2012) online images are not separated according to their respective audiences. Separation and appropriateness were shown to be more general issues by Berg (2008) who found politicians had a similar problem. Again, image and identity appear to be used interchangeably, but both referring to the image (in my terms) being projected online.

Rodogno (2012) has approached the question of online identity in a more sophisticated manner. Firstly he argued for “a plurality of types of identity” (p. 314) which rather than being distinct from each other, overlapped. These identities could be viewed similarly to the multiple roles which people have in different contexts in everyday life (Glaser & Strauss, 1967). From either position, context determines identity. Rodogno then noted that the constraints of platform design could cause confusion for both the presenter and viewer, as to what type of personal identity information was

being presented. While similar issues may happen in offline contexts, there are presently many more established practices in play there, such as established environmental clues being associated with image (e.g. 'trappings of office'). From this point of view, online identity is an adapted form of our personal identity which is shaped by the context of the online environment. Considering these understandings in relation to the online LMS environment, points to a critical need for the provision of more guidance about the online images with which they present themselves.

Neither Robards (2010) nor Rodogno (2012) have found that a multiplicity of online images demonstrates a lack of integrity. For Robards (2010), multiplicity can be managed coherently; "However, as with social interactions in physical spaces, this is no easy task and can occur effectively after a certain level of reflexive and strategic thinking" (p. 22). If this is accepted, then distance online students may be able to successfully maintain multiple online images for different purposes without fearing a loss of integrity either as a student or in the other roles.

2.6 Distance education and social presence

Aside from evaluative investigations into teaching and learning in distance education, research has tended to focus on three main theoretical areas. First, developing a definitional base (Keegan, 1980) and description and history (Anderson & Simpson, 2012); second, investigating leadership, administration and management styles and issues (Latchem & Hanna, 2001); and third, developing structures for interpreting the practice of distance education, through, for example, applying the idea of generations of technologies (Taylor, 2001). Taylor highlighted the closeness of distance education and the technology which underpins its mediation when he identified five generations of distance education:

first, the Correspondence Model based on print technology; second, the Multi-media Model based on print, audio and video technologies; third, the Telelearning Model, based on applications of telecommunications

technologies to provide opportunities for synchronous communication; and fourth, the Flexible Learning Model based on online delivery via the Internet. [...] The fifth generation of distance education is essentially a derivation of the fourth generation, which aims to capitalize on the features of the Internet and the Web (pp. 2-3).

Anderson and Dron (2011) took a different approach from Taylor (2001) in providing a structure for understanding the development of distance education. Whilst Taylor argued that one generation of technology does not replace the previous, but rather adds to a repertoire; Anderson and Dron suggested a move away from a technologically determinist approach and described three generations of pedagogy aligned with preferred technologies: cognitive-behaviourist, social constructivist, and connectivist. In doing so they have provided a possible mechanism for understanding how tutors might align pedagogy and the technology they employ.

Recently, with the increasing digitisation of distance education, the research focus has turned from structural issues to interaction and transactional issues between the many distance education participants. The idea of interaction in distance education is not new (Moore, 1989), but the move to researching transactional issues (i.e. issues related to the spatial, temporal and psychological distance between students and their others) in distance education has focused on the constructs of interaction and communication (Kassandrinou, Angelaki & Mavroidis, 2014). In the distance online context, interaction has come to be viewed through the lens of Community of Inquiry (CoI) and cognitive, teaching and social presence (Garrison, Anderson & Archer, 2000).

2.6.1 Distinguishing distance education as a mode

Much of the research into distance education is underpinned by the presupposition that distance education is qualitatively different from other education modes. From the earliest days, the notion of the non-traditional nature of most distance education students ascribed to these students different motivational requirements and pressures. For example: some of these differences ranged from impact on attrition rates (Wedemeyer, 1981); to the way in which rural school administrators perceived

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acceptance of the provision of distance education in their particular context (Irvin, Hannum, de la Varre, Farmer & Keane, 2012).

Another way in which distance education was perceived as different from other educational modes was through its industrialised approach (Keegan, 1980) which is evidenced by a breaking down of the products and processes into identifiable segments which were developed and implemented by specialists; for example, the use of subject matter experts, instructional designers and administrators of student communication processes. This differs particularly from traditional higher education provision, where one person, the lecturer, is responsible for all of these teaching processes. Financial issues have been found to be significant drivers of distance online provision and design, specifically:

- alternate delivery costs for distance and online programs, which may lead to possible infrastructure savings at institutional level, but increased costs at unit level (Inglis, 2003);
- financial management of distance programs including the relative costs of face-to-face and networked learning (Rumble, 2001); and
- the increasing range of cost drivers resulting from multi-platform delivery systems and varying service packages and levels (Rumble, 2012).

Even evaluative and instrumental studies which have been undertaken into distance teaching and learning strategies and activities were underpinned by the assumption that there is a fundamental difference in the mode and context of distance education. For example studies focussed on:

- approaches and technologies to improve student outcomes (Darabi & Jin, 2013);
- investigating student perceptions of andragogical skills of tutors (Hussain, 2013); and
- comparing types of educational technologies (print-based versus video-based materials) (Donkor, 2010).

The issues arising from comparing outcomes of distance education (DE) and face-to-face (classroom instruction) were succinctly summarised by Brenard, Abrami, Lou, Borokhovski, Wade, Wozney,

Wallet, Fiset and Huang (2004) in their meta-analysis of 232 comparative studies conducted between 1985 and 2002. Their findings that “many applications of DE outperform their classroom counterparts and that many perform more poorly” (p. 379) in terms of independent achievement, attitude, and retention outcomes underscored the apparent futility of comparing the two modes. They attributed at least part of the problem to the ‘significant heterogeneity [which] remained in each subset’ (p. 379).

LaPointe and Reisetter (2008) found that the issue of fundamental differences in many aspects of the two modes – for example starting points for both students and tutors; learning spaces and times and “structural elements of the learning landscape” (p. 642) led to students valuing online communities to varying degrees over varying times. In keeping with the heterogeneity of the subset, some students saw online communities as critical to success, while others decried them as a waste of time. So the assumed general differences in the modes appeared to be less important than the specific contexts of the students, tutors and institutions.

2.6.2 Distance education and student engagement

The small amount of research regarding student engagement in the distance mode arose from studies of attrition; as was the case for the on-campus mode. These comprised studies into improving student attrition/retention in distance education programs more generally (Kember 1989a; 1989b; Kember, Lai, Murphy, Siaw & Yuen, 1992); in discipline specific contexts such as teaching (Warren, Quine & DeVries, 2012); and in institutional specific contexts such as the United Kingdom Open University (UKOU) (Simpson, 2004).

After revealing that generalised surveys often contain irrelevant questions for distance students – or at least questions which are difficult to interpret in a distance environment, Kember (1989a) developed a model to investigate attrition and progression of distance students using Tinto’s (1993) concept of *integration*. For Kember, integration of distance students into higher education is impacted, directly and/or indirectly by personal characteristics. These personal characteristics include individual, family, home, work and educational experience; goal commitment such as intrinsic motivation (love of the topic/discipline) and extrinsic motivation (ambition); academic environment

such as collective affiliation (part of a group) and normative affiliation (understanding and willingly subjecting to the 'rules of the game' in terms of academic contribution). Kember argued that students' positive experience in these areas led to academic integration – the feeling of being part of the university and its culture. Social and work environment suitability and supportiveness led to social and work integration. This was not seen as a problem unique to distance students but relevant to other groups of part-time students whose chances of progressing through their study were improved by developing "Compatible friends ... [who] ... provide direct emotional support, equivalent to family relationships, as well as buffering support in stressful situations" (Wilcox, Winn & Fyvie-Gauld, 2005, p. 707). These relationships, which are non-institutional (Leach & Zepke, 2011) in nature, are important in supporting student engagement (Anderson, Christenson, Sinclair & Lehr, 2004).

Chen, Gonyea and Kuh (2008) undertook one of the few student engagement studies in the United States focussing on distance students and comparing them with on-campus students. They reported that, in the context of the NSSE, with the exception of active and collaborative learning activities, distance students were generally as engaged, and often more engaged, than other students in most educational practices. Subsequently, Chen, Lambert and Guidry (2010) used large scale surveys to identify any impact of the use of web-based learning technology on college student engagement. While some of these students might be considered distance students, they did not participate in significant enough numbers to enable specific findings. However, a generally positive relationship between the use of web learning technologies and student engagement and learning outcomes was identified.

Richardson and Long (2003) applied the concepts of academic engagement and perceptions of academic quality to a distance context. Whilst their study initially compares distance students who had a hearing loss with those who did not, they found that overall there was little difference between the groups in how students engaged. Adapting two student surveys, the Academic Engagement Form (AEF) (Foster, Long & Snell, 1999) and the Course Experience Questionnaire (CEQ), to suit the distance education context, they identified a number of factors which impacted learner engagement.

These included student age and qualifications prior to undertaking the current course (previous academic experience). In emphasising the importance of engagement for this group of students, Richardson and Long claimed to demonstrate a close relationship “between students’ academic engagement with their courses (as measured by the AEF) and their perceptions of the academic quality of those courses (as measured by the CEQ)” (p. 238)¹¹. While their study emphasised the importance of the tutor role in narrowing the transactional distance between students, staff and the institution, it did not investigate what role, if any, the use of technology played in engagement.

In one of the relatively few recent Australasian studies specifically focussing on distance student engagement, Kahu, Stephens, Leach and Zepke, (2013) found that “these students [distance mature age] are as satisfied as the more traditional-aged, on-campus students” (p. 791). This led them to suggest that the distance mature-aged students’ experience was qualitatively different from the experience of the on-campus student.

2.6.3 Distance education, educational technology and online learning

As early as 1990, Mason and Kaye argued that online learning has characteristics of both distance and face-to-face education. They based this proposition on the fact that the spatial, temporal (transactional) distance of asynchronous online activities, together with the interactional, online community and synchronous communications, actually mimicked face-to-face interactions.

Underlining the importance of the role technology plays in distance education are studies of mediated communications processes and patterns. Studies by Ortner, Graff and Wilmersdoefer (1992) supported this position in regard to the transmission of information, or the mediation of didactical interrelations of students and tutors, or students with other students. As Friesen and Kuskis (2012) stated more recently: “the mediated context of distance education has compelled distance educators to consider more seriously interactions between students and more diverse educational media... [in an environment] so dominated by social activity” (p. 351).

¹¹ As a precautionary note, Burt (2005) raises technical problems with their use of measures of variance.

In linking theory, practice, and globalisation, Evans and Nation (2003) also emphasised the dynamic tension of the relationship between distance education and technology. On the one hand “educational technology was at the center (*sic*) of the renaissance that elevated distance education [to] the status of master concept in the 1970s” (p. 779) to being “in danger of becoming a multinational industry that alienated its students from each other and wider educational and social processes” (p. 780). Whilst Friesen and Kuskis (2012) echoing Brenard, et al (2004), concluded that with reference to the search for, appropriateness, efficiency and effectiveness of the use of technology in forms of interactions:

The quest for simple solutions that generalise to the many diverse contexts of distance education will likely prove futile. ... Each institution, discipline, region, and user group is certain to continue to develop unique cultural practices and expectations related to their need for and use of interaction in its myriad forms (p. 366).

2.6.4 Distance education and social presence

In trying to understand and explain how learning might take place in a non-classroom environment such as distance education, Moore (1989) developed the proposition of a learner’s transactional distance from the institution. This distance is mediated by the students’ interactions with tutors, among students themselves and between students and content, or more specifically was: “a psychological and communications space to be crossed, a space of potential misunderstanding between the inputs of instructor and those of the learner” (Moore, 1993, p. 23). Differing roles and pressures are placed on the interactees by their individual social, cultural and physical environment. Moore argued that transactional distance places different emphases on student engagement and the way in which communication takes place. Differences in immediacy of communications and availability of non-verbal clues are two examples. Given this centrality of communication, the increasing use of technology in distance education provides new challenges and opportunities; hence different skills are required of both students and tutors.

Moore's concept of transactional distance was updated to take into account web-based technologies through the work of Garrison (2000). More latterly, Gorsky and Caspi (2005), while acknowledging its historical importance in terms of moving research and discussion on from a focus on geographical and temporal distance have criticised its ambiguity in empirical terms. This does not undermine, however, the use of the issues arising from research into transactional distance, in considering the spaces which occur when students establish, develop and maintain interactions and relationships in their online study world. Transactional distance highlights the impact of social context on distance education, engagement, interacting with technologies and through them, other people.

The various communities of which students may be members contribute in part to their context. Within the distance education literature, these communities of learning, or as Garrison (2007) termed them, Communities of Inquiry (CoI), have some similarities which assist in understanding online identity. The CoI framework comprises three elements – Social, Cognitive and Teaching (Garrison, 2007). Garrison defines cognitive presence as: “the exploration, construction, resolution and confirmation of understanding through collaboration and reflection in a community of inquiry” (Garrison, 2007, p. 65). Teaching presence has “three distinct categories – design, facilitation and direct instruction” (Garrison, 2007, p. 67); whilst social presence is “the ability to project one's self and establish personal and purposeful relationships” (p. 63). The author pointed to a social presence as only the initial step in students being part of the CoI and that community members' relations and communication needed to mature for the members to achieve an intellectual or cognitive presence. Garrison argued that there was a need to ensure that effective and open communications are established on a sound basis of a well-constructed socio-emotional social presence. The cognitive presence supports effective learning, and develops from the social presence. The online identity and image of students are pivotal therefore, to sustaining a social presence in a CoI. The inter-relations between Garrison's (2007) three elements, Social, Cognitive and Teaching, are very complex. The foregrounding of cognitive presence without a suitable effort being committed to establishing a

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sound social presence may be detrimental to higher order learning skills (Lee, 2014). Akyol, Garrison and Ozden (2009) articulated this more positively: “Social presence is an important antecedent to collaboration and critical discourse because it facilitates achieving cognitive objectives by instigating, sustaining, and supporting critical thinking in a community of learners” (p. 67).

Increasing levels of teacher, cognitive and social presence are often related to improved quality of learning (Wei, Chen & Kinshuk, 2012; Lee, 2014) although research outcomes have been mixed (Kozan & Richardson, 2014). In North America, the CoI framework is being used increasingly as an empirical research tool. For example, teaching presence has been used as a concept to evaluate and improve teacher competence in online computer conferences (Anderson, Rourke, Garrison & Archer, 2001) or to evaluate wiki environments in Business courses (Daspit & D’souza, 2012), and improve the design of interfaces (Hess, Fuller & Campbell, 2009). Social and learning elements are also linked as components of a sense of community by Rovai (2002). For him the learning component, “the feeling that knowledge and meaning are actively constructed within the community” (p. 322), social component is encompassed by a sense of connectedness; describing it as the “recognition of membership in a community and the feelings of friendship, cohesion, and satisfaction that develop among learners” (p. 322). The clear focus in all of this literature is the improvement of learning outcomes through fostering online student interaction (Akyol, Garrison & Ozden, 2009) and is based in connectivist pedagogies (Anderson & Dron, 2011) which emphasised the development of knowledge through collaborative learning.

Mann (2005) changed the focus from developing community and collaboration to improving communication in the online environment:

It seems to me this analysis suggests a need for ways in which to open up communication and dialogue in the learning community, so that teachers and learners can actually engage with the very real issues that concern them. It implies the necessity of *facilitating dialogue* in the learning group, rather than seeking to establish *a sense of belonging* to a learning community. (p. 50, her emphasis)

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Her contention was that this minimises the impact of existing and unchallenged norms and expectations of the lifeworlds of students and teachers: “There is thus, an important emphasis here on openness and challenge” (p.51).

The projection of one’s self is to develop an image to present to tutors and peers, through which one interacts. Hence, in addition to the self-knowledge of identity, image forms a basis for the development of online relationships through a social presence. Shea and Bidjerano (2009) also linked “students’ sense of connectedness and learning [to] their levels of online “learning community” within the CoI framework” (p. 545) leading to epistemic engagement (Larreamendy-Joerns & Leinhardt, 2006). They describe this as: “the potential of online education in environments that foster the epistemic and discursive practices typical of disciplinary communities by providing a wide range of opportunities for intellectual engagement and interaction” (p. 584).

The problems resulting from a lack of a physical presence have been an issue for some over time (see Mersham, 2009 for an overview from a communications perspective). For Mersham, the lack of a physical presence online cannot be reversed by cognitive, social and teaching presences in a community of inquiry, “... physical presence is a necessary condition for teaching and learning” (p. 56). However, as Kehrwald (2010) has suggested, the online experience is a *different* experience rather than a *lesser* experience, with students (and tutors) needing to develop skills to engage effectively:

to project themselves as viable communicative partners with identities that include relevant personal characteristics [and skills including] the abilities to read and interpret social presence cues—recognising familiar social cues, learning about new types of cues, reading available information in a nuanced way, and filling in information gaps through various forms of subjective interpretation including projection and ‘seeing as’, in which readers of social presence interpret available information and fix the meaning of ambiguous or unclear messages. (p. 39)

These are not new arguments in distance education, although as Kehrwald point out, the impact of the overlaying ICT requires a nuanced response.

2.7 Conclusion

In summary, in order to distil the key ideas from the student engagement literature, I have grouped it in four ways:

- by sector (Foundation-12 or higher education);
- through the research approaches undertaken (behavioural, cognitive, social-cultural and holistic (Kahu, 2013));
- with regard to approaches to learning & socio-cultural factors (Mann, 2001); or
- in terms of student motivation and agency, transactional engagement, active citizenship, institutional support and non-institutional factors (Leach & Zepke, 2011).

Whilst such literature has identified the impact of student engagement upon many aspects of the student experience, student engagement has been linked primarily to the quality of learning (ACER, 2009). Additionally, although various contextual (individual, institutional and socio-cultural) factors that impact the meaning of engagement for students have been identified; for example the impact of working part-time (Wintrup, Wakefield & James, 2013) or learning within digital environments (Ryan, Franklin, Galsinh, Potter, Wren, Kerrigan, Coombs & Walker, 2013), engagement as a term has carried more meaning for those in education research or administration, than for the students or their teachers (Ratcliffe & Dimmock, 2013).

Studies of ICT in higher education have increased in number and range over the past decade. For example, focal points for research have included the investigation of the impact of specific hardware/software/applications on student experience, and on learning outcomes; the impact of the use of ICT in different disciplines; investigations of the impact of student and teacher ICT skills on outcomes; and philosophical issue regarding use by students and teachers/tutors. Although critical to all of these studies, students have been portrayed as a homogenous group rather than identifying diversity, for example the millennial generation (Prensky, 2001) from mature aged students, or students from non-traditional backgrounds. It is only recently that there have been a small number of

studies related to student perceptions of ICT and its use in higher education. Authors in this area have noted that it is an aspect of ICT use in higher education that needs greater attention.

Initial teacher education students develop their professional identity as part of their progress through their course by way of their development of discipline knowledge and the socialisation of professional colleagues, either academic or with whom they work in professional training. The roles students played responded to the context within which they lived, worked and studied. (Solomonides & Reid, 2009)

An added layer of complication for distance online students is the identity which they develop and the image which they portray through the digital world to their tutors and peers. While there has been little study to date into the online identity and image of distance students, there is increasing evidence that managing an online image and identity, in general, is a significant part of digital life (Rodogno, 2012).

The blurring of the line differentiating distance and online study has allowed the concept of Community of Inquiry, in which students develop a social, cognitive and teaching presence (Garrison, 2007), to be used as an analytic framework for understanding how learning occurs in both environments, separately and together. Again, the orientation of this research is towards the pragmatic outcome of improving student learning outcomes, rather than investigating student perspectives.

With only a small segment of the higher education student cohort, distance education has not been a focus of research in student engagement. In fact this has been a consistent theme across all areas relevant to this investigation. This, coupled with an apparent lack of research interest in student perspectives, evidences the need for this investigation.

Chapter Three: Research Design

3.1 Introduction

This chapter describes the background, approach and context of the investigation; details the design, including the method and techniques used; discusses the analysis of the data; and addresses issues arising from the choice of design and its implementation.

3.2 Background

As was outlined in Chapter Two, three main research foci originally underpinned this study - student engagement, online learning as a sub-set of educational technology, and distance education. As a result of participant perceptions gathered through the interviews, the concept of development of online identity and image was added as the investigation progressed. Until recently quantitative methodologies have played a primary role in studying student engagement and online learning. Although the survey has been the instrument of choice for researchers in the field of student experience / engagement (for example NSSE, AUSSE & FYEQ) for student engagement (Laird & Kuh, 2005; Coates, 2006; 2007), mixed methods (Johnson & Onwuegbuzie, 2004) and multi-mode approaches through the addition of follow-up participant interviews (Mayes, 2006; Creanor, Trinder, Gowan & Howells, 2007; 2008) have also been used.

The fact that qualitative studies had been underrepresented in the literature to a significant degree led Friesen (2009) to claim that research in e-learning needed “to be re-thought, to catch up with new developments in theory, and to reflect rapidly developing social and technical practices and configurations” (p. 2). He argued that the use of quantitative approaches modelled on the natural-scientific method, would never carry the same conviction in education as they did in medical research for example, as they were not able to be replicated thousands of times in controlled situations. The small scale of many studies in educational technologies, along with a failure to control for all possible variables in others, has led to questions of the appropriateness of conclusions drawn from these studies, and how widely the results of could be generalised (Burt, 2005; Richardson, 2005).

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Similar issues in regards to conflicting results and conclusions were highlighted by the “No Significant Difference” work of Russell (2001) and others (<http://nosignificantdifference.org/>). As Oblinger and Hawkins (2006) pointed out: “The answer [to the question does technology make a significant difference] depends on how the question is asked” (p. 15). Their statement could be interpreted in two ways. First, in what manner was the question asked and second, what were the mechanisms by which it was asked. Methodologically speaking, it would depend on whom *was asked* the question, in relation to *whom asked* it and *when they asked* it. Questions asked in more than one way enable a greater depth of understanding and potentially provide greater detail through the gathering of more individually-meaningful and contextualised information (Ellingson, 2009; Richardson, 2000). As Cresswell (2007) summarised “The researcher’s intent, then, is to make sense (or interpret) the meanings others have about the world” (p. 21).

This investigation has been informed by both the outcomes of relevant research and their methodologies, providing me with several alternative research approaches to consider. For example, with respect to researching the impact of educational technology, the predominant approaches documented in journals such as *The British Journal of Educational Technology*, *The Australian Journal of Educational Technology*, and *Journal of Technology Education*, privileged either pre-test/treatment/post-test and/or the statistical analysis of surveys of observer or participant perceptions. In regard to student engagement, the use of NSSE, AUSSE or other survey instruments and their associated statistical analyses had been the mainstay (Khu, 2001; Coates, 2006). In addition to surveys, both interviews and observation have been used in research into distance education and online identity and image (Kember, Lee & Li, 2001). Exceptions to the use of quantitative studies in the exploration of student engagement do exist, albeit remaining a minority of studies. For example, Case, Marshall and Linder (2010) used a narrative approach to explore student engagement and alienation; and Tannis (2013) used a phenomenological approach to investigate how international students sought assistance in the use of new educational technology.

3.3 The approach

The approach I undertook in this investigation draws strongly upon the research practices outlined by van Manen and others (Finlay, 2012; Friesen, 2009; Friesen, Henriksson & Saevi, 2012). An important driver of the methodology I decided upon was to re-align the discussion of student engagement from the generalised, broad-brush and institutionally oriented approaches to a more particular, detailed personal approach.

3.3.1 Context

One aspect of the context of my research, relates to the methodological journey I undertook along the way, specifically the change in my research design from an intention to undertake a quantitative analysis of survey data to a human science research approach - researching the lived experience (van Manen, 1990). In selecting his human science research approach, I was aware of the potential complexities van Manen highlighted:

While it is true that the method of phenomenology is that there is no method, yet there is tradition, a body of knowledge and insights, a history of lives of thinkers and authors, which, taken as an example constitutes both a source and a methodological ground for present human science research practices

(1990, p. 30).

Given my personal background and experiences (see section 1.4), I had an interest in developing an *understanding* of process, through endeavouring to discover meaning rather than *quantifying* process. Perhaps there was even a trace of Bolshevism arising from being told too many times technology was causing a paradigm shift! In any event, “At the very least research which is anchored in a more critical realist, modernist position deserves some healthy questioning” (Finlay, 2012, p. 32) resonated with my thinking and epistemological position. While ready to accept the need to develop evidence-based policy in distance higher education, the imbalance towards metrics which I perceived biased me towards interpretative, qualitative methods and techniques.

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A range of possible qualitative approaches (e.g. see Creswell, 2007; Lincoln & Guba, 1985) to the research questions was available to me. The decision to choose van Manen's (1990) human science approach of researching the lived experience was strengthened by an understanding that van Manen's fundamental orientation was pedagogic. The focus (in van Manen's early work) was on the child, but equally encapsulated the adult learner as evidenced by the more recent work of Friesen (2009; 2011) and van Manen & Adams (2009).

To complement the more positivist research undertaken in the study of educational technology, I wanted to contribute a more detailed and individualistic investigation of the student experience, to add flesh to the bare bones that much of the previous research represented. With the reliance of hermeneutic phenomenology on (re)writing and interpretation I accepted the freedom which this approach provided to re-visit in detail some of the finer grained issues regarding engagement of distance online students.

Hermeneutic phenomenological as an "interpretive phenomenology, ... has emerged from the work of hermeneutic philosophers, including Heidegger, Gadamer, and Ricoeur," (Finlay, 2012, p. 22) and in this investigation, enabled me to be more nimble and responsive in bringing to the foreground the perceptions of the participants.

The approach allowed the participants to define the issues in a manner not addressed by large scale surveys; and through the use of context-sensitive interpretive inquiry (van Manen, 1990; Friesen, 2011) enabled the distillation of meanings for the phenomenon of student engagement. In looking for a way of encouraging the participant voice, I also was encouraged by the way a hermeneutic phenomenological research approach has been used in work in other professional fields such as nursing (Walsh, 1996). However, it is in the use of context-sensitive interpretive inquiry based on the cogent arguments of van Manen (1990) and Friesen (2011) more widely in education (e.g. Clark, 2011; Tannis, 2013; Kraglund-Gauthier, 2011; Wyman, 2012) that this investigation was based. The balancing of description and interpretation, and creatively using the tension between the two, is central to this study. In moving between these two actions I intend to provide a 'picture' and some

assistance in understanding it without covertly biasing the representation. This is a complex and difficult relationship, which Peter Ashworth (King, Finlay, Ashworth, Smith, Langdridge & Butt, 2008) describes: “I recognize the very fact of ‘wording’ experience and making it available to the readers of research reports is already interpretive in a sense” (p. 100).

The move to the interpretative approach brought with it the need for me to be more involved with the participants rather than treating them in a ‘removed’ manner through a survey. After dealing with students and tutors over many years as an instructional designer, manager, support person and other roles, I was made aware of the different characteristics required of a researcher in this approach by my supervisors and through reviewing examples of the writings of others (for example: van Manen, (1990); Schwartz-Shea & Yanow, 2012).

3.4 The research question

The divination of a research question for this investigation was itself part of the personal and epistemological journey mentioned above. Initially the research question focussed on identifying the impact of technology on student engagement; however, as data were generated and my participants provided insights into their perceptions of the phenomena, it became more important to me to bring these perceptions to the centre of the research. This led to a subtle but significant shift in my thinking and a finessing of the research question. The change in emphasis of the question removed from the discussion an assumption that technology was the main factor impacting student engagement and lead to the research question:

What are initial teacher education students’ perceptions of engagement as they study online in the distance mode?

More specifically within this context, this investigation aims to respond to the sub-questions:

- *What do students understand of their experiences of engagement?*
- *In what ways do educational technologies impact student engagement? and*
- *How do tutor attitudes impact student engagement? (particularly in the context of a technology environment)*

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In investigating the research question I identified two ways of viewing the participant students:

- 1 life as a distance online student
- 2 life as a distance student, online

The subtleties of the differences of these two perspectives were important to the way in which I conceptualised this dissertation. As distance students, the participants live their lives, as students, through and in the online environment. Unlike on-campus students, this mediation proscribes their student experience, which includes their experience of student engagement.

Specifically, the *distance online student* perspective situates engagement in the space, time, body and relations in which the participants live as a student off-campus – the broader contextual issues which help shape and form their roles as they experience life day to day, and which impact their perceptions of their engagement as students. Their transactional distance from tutors, peers and the campus more generally differentiates them from students who have the opportunity to meet face-to-face and experience whatever campus life may have to offer. This is particularly true for those who have never attended campus and had little familial experience of it on which to draw.

However, I have identified a specific life which is inhabited by distance *students* [when they go] *online*. This life is undertaken in a digital world where space, time, body and relations take on different meanings for the participants. While non-distance students also use this environment, they have alternative options for engaging. In responding to the context of their student life, an element of choice was available, which is not the case for distance students. Changes as viewed from these two perspectives, particularly as they apply to the students' understandings of engagement and their relationship with technologies, underpinned the focus of this investigation.

Whilst my research focussed predominantly upon investigating the phenomenon of students' perceptions of engagement, I felt it was important to also explore the possible influences tutors might have upon this phenomenon; a focus supported by the literature. As tutors and students develop a unique relationship in the teaching and learning environment, tutors' attitudes to engagement may impact upon their students' perceptions of this phenomenon.

3.5 Method

Researching the lived experience is not a step by step prescriptive, structured process (van Manen, 1990) in that it does not separate the methodological from the analytical frameworks. It first and foremost meets human beings where they are; it does not follow mechanistic, experimental structures and testing. The six "methodological themes" (p. 30) van Manen has provided as a practical approach to undertaking human science research, have helped facilitate my selection of techniques and procedures which are in sympathy with researching lived experiences. In developing the method of this investigation I used the framework of activities listed below as the touchstones for holding true to the human science research approach:

- (1) Turning to a phenomenon which seriously interests us and commits us to the world: The phenomenon to which this investigation was committed is the experience of engagement from the perspective of distance students in online environments. It was not a simple phenomenon because of the complex multiple socio-cultural contexts in which it was situated. As mentioned in Chapter 1, the tension between what I have read in the literature and what students and tutors have told me over many years led me to address this issue.
- (2) Investigating experience as we live it rather than as we conceptualise it: Putting aside pre-conceptions of the phenomenon of which I had some experience, and listening to the lived experience of the participants in their own language presented a significant barrier to overcome. I needed

to acknowledge that my view of students and tutors could not be confined to the people with whom I had worked. Stepping around a significant volume of literature and many years' experience demanded a high degree of self-control and "re-learning to look at the world" (van Manen, 1990, p. 31).

- (3) Reflecting on the essential themes which characterize the phenomenon:
The complexity of this phenomenon also worked to obscure the true nature of the students' lived experience. Their multiple roles; for example as students, spouses, parents and workers all added layers (Moss & Pittaway, 2010) to their lives as they spoke. The act of reflecting on the experiences of these students, individually and as a group led to the identification of some commonalities beyond appearances, but which I believe, gave form and substance to these appearances.
- (4) Describing the phenomenon through the art of writing and rewriting:
"Experientially, language and thinking are difficult to separate" (van Manen, 1990, p. 32). For me the writing, reflection and re-writing brought their own challenges. Styles and structures learned in previous lives as zoologist, teacher and professional manager, needed to be actively forgotten to make way for more appropriate forms to give voice to the participants.
- (5) Maintaining a strong and oriented pedagogical relationship to the phenomenon: More than once I was tempted to be side-tracked and in van Manen's terms "wander aimlessly and indulge in wishy-washy speculations, to settle for pre-conceived opinions and conceptions, to become enchanted with narcissistic reflections or self-indulgent preoccupations" (1990, p. 33).

- (6) Balancing the research context by considering parts and whole: Bringing all of the constituent parts of this investigation together in one dissertation also presented its own problems and pitfalls. As van Manen observed, the constant balancing of the parts giving appropriate voice (to students, tutors and technologies); the organising of the text to structure the argument, getting out of the holes that were dug; all took effort and guidance.

These research activities circumscribed my attitudes and actions in this investigation and at a more practical and immediate level, they helped define the method which I developed to respond to the research questions.

As part of describing and unpacking this method, it was helpful to me to describe the procedures and techniques developed to match the research activities. Van Manen (1990) was clear in distinguishing between the two (procedures and techniques); for him, “the term “procedure” refers to various rules and routines associated with the practice of research” (p. 28) whilst techniques entailed “connotations of expertise in a professional or technical sense” (p. 28).

3.5.1 Procedures

The major procedures in this design were to:

- Gain ethics approval; and
- Select and recruit participants.

Gaining Ethics Approval

As part of the research process ethics approval was sought and granted (Reference H0011690) for this investigation (Appendix 1). The application outlined risk management issues, the procedures to be undertaken and provided a description of the techniques used, including a copy of the draft Semi-Structured Interview Guide.

Participant Selection and Recruitment

Given the method chosen for this investigation, manageability of the process necessitated the limitation on the number of participants. Limiting the number of participants in this investigation to between seven and 10 students and four and six tutors, enabled a thorough exploration of the diversity of the lives and circumstances of participants. Such an exploration led to a better understanding of their perceptions of engagement and the impact which learning technologies might have had in their particular context. The geographic and demographic spread of participants necessitated degree of negotiation and made participant recruitment and interview scheduling an iterative process. No attempt was made to explicitly match the two participant groups; that is, to recruit students and tutors who may have participated in the same tutorial groups. Equally, potential participants were not excluded on the basis of having been in the same tutorial group as another participant.

Selection of students

The parameters of the investigation provided the criteria for selection of students to participate in the investigation. This purposeful sampling (“Purposeful sampling”, 2010) was designed to ensure that participants were studying at a distance, of mature age and had no, or limited previous experience of studying at university level. So as well as mapping for exposure¹² (Schwartz & Yanow, 2012), there was more clearly a convenience factor in looking to the group of students available. The central criteria were:

- Fully online, distance mode, pre-service education students of the Faculty of Education (University);
- Living in areas remote from the university’s campuses, (thus emphasising the centrality of the online environment in their experience); and

¹² Schwartz-Shea & Yanow (2012) describe the concept of exposure as resting “on the notion that the researcher wants to encounter, or be exposed to, the wide variety of meanings made by research-relevant participants of their experiences” (p. 85).

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- Having no or limited previous university undergraduate experience before beginning their current course (thus emphasising their lack of on-campus experience).

In order to increase the range of possible student views (Schwartz & Yanow, 2012), the following criteria were also used:

- A mix of genders;
- A mix of year, of course and of units;
- Specifying non-school leavers; and
- A broad background of work /practicum/professional development experience.

Recruitment of participant students

An invitation to participate in the investigation (Appendix 2) was disseminated (emailed through the Faculty of Education office) to all fully distance online Bachelor of Education students within the Faculty of Education. From the subset of the respondents, nine participants were purposefully sampled (as per the criteria above) and negotiations undertaken regarding the time and place of the proposed meetings. The final selection of participants was on a 'first come, first incorporated' basis after their suitability against the criteria had been directly confirmed with them by me.

Selection of tutors

In a similar attempt to map for exposure (Schwartz & Yanow, 2012) and paralleling the process for students, a number of criteria related to the selection of tutor participants were identified.

- Full-time member of the Faculty of Education (University);
- A mix of experience in teaching online prior to teaching the current group; and
- A mix of those involved as unit designers, co-ordinators and/or tutors in online teaching of the target student group.

Recruitment of participant tutors

An invitation to participate in the investigation (Appendix 3) was emailed to the faculty through the Faculty of Education office. From the respondents, five suitable participants were purposively

sampled (as per the criteria above) and negotiations undertaken regarding the time and place of the proposed meetings.

It should be noted that for ethical reasons, my two supervisors, who were both members of the Faculty (and teachers in the online environment of the student cohort) were excluded from being interviewed as part of this investigation. Given the perceived power relationships between tutors and students involved with this investigation and Chief Investigator and the Co-investigator, (Supervisor and Co-supervisor respectively) who were both colleagues and tutors, confidentiality became even more important than might usually have been expected. It was made very clear that only I would have access to the raw data. Apart from me, only the participants would see their respective interview transcripts. Pseudonyms were applied to all participants. References to specific units and information which might identify individuals were not made available to any other participant and were not used in other discussions. For example, specific issues raised about specific tutors and/or units in student discussions were not referenced in tutor discussions. In all discussions with supervisors, anonymity of participants was assured.

3.5.2 Techniques

The major techniques incorporated into this design were:

- Development of a semi-structured interview guide;
- Piloting the interview guide;
- Generating the data; and
- Developing and implementing an Analytical Framework.

Development of semi-structured interview guides

Dealing efficiently and effectively with the transactional distance experienced when working with distance students was a key issue in the development of research semi-structured interview guides. The selection of participants from remote locations meant that they were spread across the state and indeed some were located interstate, complicating the logistics of interview planning.

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Semi-structured interviews are interviews based on an interview guide that provides a number of stimulus and guiding questions. There are two main reasons for the use of semi-structured interviews in this investigation. Firstly, semi-structured interviews encourage discussion and the generation of data, whilst avoiding the risk of not covering the intended focus of the research. Rabionet (2011) noted the power of their use in their ability to focus discussion: “A completely unstructured interview has the risk of not eliciting from [...] the topics or themes more closely related to the research questions under consideration” (p. 564). Secondly, with the amount of travelling and hence time and space between participants, I wanted to ensure comparability between interviews.

While I created a list of questions, the interviews were allowed to unfold in a conversational manner, enabling participants to explore new ideas and discuss areas / issues of importance to them. Interview guides were developed for the students (Appendix 4) and tutors (Appendix 5). Aside from an opening question about the participants’ understandings of engagement, the design of each was such that it provided prompt questions, issues and ideas for me to begin an interview and guide and stimulate the subsequent discussion should it become necessary.

The development of the interview guides was informed by the six benchmarks from the AUSSE instrument:

- Active Learning
- Academic Challenge
- Student and Staff Interactions
- Enriching Educational Experiences
- Supportive Learning Environment
- Work Integrated Learning

These benchmarks were used to focus the interviews and to encourage engagement by the participants in the ongoing discussion. For the student group the benchmark-based questions were supplemented by questions which focussed upon issues such as use of technology for non-learning

activities and contextual issues relating to the impact of family and friends on their engagement. For the tutor group issues of attitudes to technology and perceptions of students were also added.

Piloting the interview guides

The interview guides and processes were pilot tested to check their usefulness, including whether the questions being asked were understood as intended, and my skills and fluency as a discussant in this type of interaction. A supervisor and two colleagues (one who had experience with teaching distance students and the other who had been a remote distance higher education student) provided feedback. Adjustments to ambiguous questions and faults in my interview/discussant style were made in response to feedback. These changes included using terminology in a manner similar to the way it was used within the institution and discipline. For example MyLO (Desire2learn) terms within the LMS and institutional language for units of study. I was also keen to be less directive of the participants responses.

Data generation

With the exception of one tutor (where there was only one interview possible because of timing problems) and one student (where a health issue arose), two semi-structured interviews of approximately one hour duration were conducted with each participant. Although the research design had allowed for three interviews, two factors allowed of a more reflective, free-ranging second interview with each and no practical/methodological need for a third. The first was the volume and richness of data generated from the initial interviews with each participant. The second was the way in which their construction of their experience was so intimately linked to the context of those experiences. Participants were asked to nominate a location for interview so as to provide them with some sense of control and comfort. Descriptions of these locations are provided in Chapter Four.

Where possible, interviews were conducted face-to-face with participants. Initially, the parameters of the interviews (which had been communicated to participants earlier) were briefly

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reviewed and some demographic data noted as a form of 'settling in' and helping both the participants and myself feel more comfortable. All interviews were recorded and went smoothly, with no aspect of the process receiving a negative reaction from participants. There were occasional interruptions from phone calls and/or questions from children or students and colleagues, but these did not appear to me to disrupt the overall flow of the interview process.

There were two exceptions to the face-to-face interviews: the first was Tricia (student) who was very remote from campus, making face-to-face interviews impracticable – both of her interviews were conducted over Skype, which provided a "...way of overcoming distances both in space and time" (Peräkylä & Ruusuvuori, 2011, p. 531).

The second was Mary (student) with whom I had a face-to-face interview initially, however the subsequent interview was cancelled due to her work commitments and could only be held over Skype. The use of Skype (both video and audio components) added a technological interface to the data collection which was explored with each of the participants at the beginning of their interview. Both were experienced and willing Skype users who felt that using Skype did not change the perceived quality of their interactions with me. From my perspective, I felt that I needed to take more time in getting to feel comfortable with Tricia compared with Mary, as I had previously had a face-to-face interview with Mary and felt I had established more of a rapport with her as a result. However, as the connections were technically sound, my perception was that in each of the three Skype interviews the technology was backgrounded.

The issue of using mediated interviews is not new to qualitative research, however, because of the newness of internet-based technologies, there has been more research undertaken on telephone interviews than Skype interviews. While Skype uses both audio and video signals and displays, the underpinning findings regarding telephone use are re-assuring of its usefulness. For example, Holt (2010) investigated the use of the telephone for narrative interviewing and concluded that there was:

no need to consider the use of telephones for narrative interviewing as a 'second-best' option: indeed, there may be sound ideological, methodological and practical

reasons why it may be a more favourable mode than the often 'default mode' of face-to-face interviewing. (p. 120)

Irvine, Drew and Sainsbury (2012) identified at least five potential effects of conducting interviews by phone including: "rapport and the naturalness of the interaction; comprehension and the transmission or interpretation of meaning; monitoring of responses and emotions; levels of interest and attention; and the duration of interviews" (p. 89).

Increasing availability of Skype and the familiarity of students in using it for both formal and informal purposes would seem to build on the understanding of the use of the telephone for research purposes. Hanna (2012), in noting this possibility, also pointed to the fact that participants are able to remain in the "comfortable location of their home while being interviewed without the sense the researcher is encroaching on their personal space" (p. 241). He considered this to have an additional positive effect on the interview. Checking the process and outcomes of the three Skype interviews in this investigation against these potential effects, indicated that they were fit for purpose, and I was comfortable with the appropriateness of using Skype as an interviewing medium.

Although, for the most part, two one hour interviews were used, their overall flow, structure and sequence were based on Seidman's (2006) three interview model:

The first interview establishes the context of the participants' experience. The second allows participants to reconstruct the details of their experience within the context in which it occurs. The third encourages the participants to reflect on the meaning their experience holds for them. (p. 17)

Given the nature of this approach, it proved difficult to time the first interview so that it ended at any specific point. It was necessary therefore, to carry over each interview from one session to the next at varying points of the interview. While it required a small amount of re-capping, the participants seemed to be comfortable with this arrangement and it allowed for a settling in time for the second interview, although it did lead to some repetition.

All interviews were digitally recorded and I transcribed them myself, incorporating pauses, laughter, 'space-filling' "ums" and "errs". Before the second interview participants were provided with a transcript of the first interview for review. This review process should not to be confused with member checking (Carlson, 2010), which remains a contestable activity in qualitative research (McConnell-Henry, Chapman & Francis, 2011). Member checking in this context seemed inappropriate given the distances between myself and many of the student participants and the fact that I was concerned that should participants have received a later, more developed version of the text there was a (slight) possibility of endangering confidentiality. Rather, in the context of this investigation, the participant review focussed on factual errors in the recording of the interview, and/or other changes which participants might feel appropriate. Such a review offered a degree of control to participants which enabled me to remain authentic to the aim of giving them a voice. Also, as the transcript of the first interview was provided for review a short time prior to the second interview, it provided a bridge between the two interviews allowing the participants to re-familiarise themselves some of the previous discussion. The second interview (where it occurred) was provided for review after it was transcribed and before interpretation of it began. In the event, apart from spelling corrections and incorrect recording of acronyms, there were no significant changes to the transcriptions requested by the participants.

Participants were also invited to bring along to the interviews (or in Tricia's case - email in) any artefacts which might exemplify how they felt about their study or what using technology meant to them and how they engaged with their study. The only person to respond to this invitation was Geraldine who provided a short piece of prose regarding her feelings about her loss of internet connectivity for an extended time.

The main variation between student and tutor interviews was that tutor interviews were focussed on eliciting the tutors' perceptions of student engagement and their perceptions of how students perceive their own engagement. Conceived as part of mapping for exposure, I initially intended to use tutor responses to add to the richness of the anecdotes and experiences related by

the students and to provide further background against which to interpret the student responses. However, as the tutor interviews progressed, they took on a life of their own. As will be seen in Chapters Five, Six and Seven, the impact of technology on tutors' worlds and the way in which they engaged with students and the units in which they were tutoring were closely intertwined.

Overall, during the interviews I was mindful that as a grey-haired doctoral student, I may have not fitted the image that participant students had developed. In fact field notes revealed that at least one student mentioned that I was a little old to be a student (and included a laugh). On balance, I believe that my age may have had a positive impact as all student interviews were conducted in a relaxed atmosphere.

To me, the power relationship seemed different in tutor interviews. While friendly and relaxed, I sensed a more formal feel to the interviews. This may have been a function of the fact that there was an awareness of my 'doctoral student' role and an understanding of the rite of passage through which I was passing.

Analytic/Interpretative framework

Data analysis commenced with the transcription process, in which the inclusion of pauses, laughter¹³, 'space-filling' "ums" and "errs" added depth to participant responses. Such a process offers a way of drawing the reader into the emotional, non-verbal components of the interviews; perhaps as examples of the thoughtfulness which might have been exhibited during a response; or providing greater understanding of the participant state of mind when speaking about some experience, for example - the sarcastic laugh (van Manen, 1990).

For me a significant decision in the analysis process related to whether I should use computer-assisted qualitative data analysis software (CAQDAS) such as NVivo. My eventual decision not to use such technology was informed by considerable discussion in the research

¹³ The "laugh" which occurred within my interviews with the participants took many forms. Sometime it represented a nervousness - not quite knowing what to say next, not sure of the correct word to use so that a feeling was well represented; it could be embarrassment - realising that what was said might be construed by me, as being rude or too forthright; or as a result of realising something very humorous has been said; perhaps evidencing a feeling of cynicism or the realisation of feelings of pessimism; or the laugh may even be considered as a type of van Manen's (1990) silences; the sound of the laugh camouflaging the meaning of a silence.

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literature regarding its use. Of particular importance in my decision was a paper by Roberts and Wilson (2002) which focussed on the tension between the philosophical underpinnings of ICT (which tend to be logical, objective and quantifiable procedures) and those underpinning qualitative research (which take a more subjective, interpretative stance and seek to explore meaning). In addition, the argument that software such as NVivo alters both the research process and the researcher (Goble, Austin, Larsen, Kreitzer & Brintnell, 2012), as it can become just one more thing standing between “us and our lived experience” (p. 15), convinced me to adopt a more time consuming but rewarding manual approach.

After I had transcribed the interviews, I read them in depth and made notes of my initial thoughts as I read. For example, I questioned: what main points were being made by the participant, and whether words or phrases re-occurred. I replayed the interviews while reading the transcription and marked up points that the participants emphasised, making connections using lines and highlighters. Using a second (clean) transcript, I juxtaposed segments from the same participant to understand more clearly the perceptions they represented. In some cases I read transcripts alongside those of other participants. After reading the transcripts in detail, line by line, I (re)read them in more general ways to try to bring to the foreground meanings hidden in the shortest anecdote or at a broader, more holistic level. I searched for the extraordinary in the most ordinary, all the time listening for meaning in what was being said, or perhaps sometimes being left unsaid. This was a laborious process and I needed to keep transcripts well organised.

This search for the participants’ perceptions of their lived experience was not a random process, but took place within an analytical framework. In the first instance, I analysed transcriptions through thematic analysis (Van Manen, 1990), with the aim of “.. trying to determine what the themes are, the experiential structures that make up that experience” (p. 79). The thematic commonalities arising from the individuals’ experiences provided me with the opportunity to identify issues shared by the participants which provided broader insights into phenomena. The focus on the individual’s

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experience of the phenomenon (student engagement) online was represented through the existentials (van Manen, 1990) which were identified through an interpretative analysis (hermeneutic) – reflective writing and re-writing - of the participants' recorded perceptions.

The juggling of being alert to the descriptive, that is letting "things speak for themselves" (van Manen, 1990, p. 180), and the interpretive nature of my reading was a demanding process. Listening for themes was an iterative process. To clarify, I provide two brief (and over-simplified) examples.

The first example relates to the identification of obvious themes, those evident from even a cursory read. This was the case for "connectedness". Feeling *connected* was a term used by all student participants. In a sense, that was the easy part to identify the recurring word. However, developing an understanding of what it meant to each participant and whether this meaning was shared with others was a more complex undertaking. Re-reading, and sometimes re-writing were needed in an effort to distil, or perhaps interpret the meaning.

My second example is exemplified by the themes of image and identity, which were foregrounded in a different way. The terms were not used directly by student participants, but arose from the intertextuality of the transcripts. As I was reading the transcripts, a number of student participants referred to the importance of knowing more about their tutors and peers so that they could interact more efficiently and effectively, or perhaps not at all (my terms). As I re-read the text, the student words aggregated around the two concepts, image and identity (these will be explained more fully later). Once I chose these, checking them back against the text aligned with what I felt the students were saying.

Irrespective of the manner in which the themes emerged, they were subsequently used as lenses for re-reading the shared and individual lived experiences of both students and tutors. Initially I had intended to reflect on student and tutor perceptions separately. However, as these themes emerged, it seemed that the inter-relationship of the student and tutors' lived experience and the ties and tensions which arose from them demanded that I consider them, together. The lived experiences that participants shared (both student and

student, and student and tutor), even those which the participants may not have imagined, were investigated to determine if their respective meanings might also be shared.

Because of their recurring nature in the transcripts, these themes appeared to be closely related to the feelings that distance online students had about being engaged. To better understand the meanings which these themes carried for participants and their relevance to participants' perception of being engaged, I looked to van Manen's (1990) framework of the four existentials as an interpretative guide. These existentials are: lived time – temporality; lived space – spatiality; lived body – corporeality; and lived other – relationality, and I analysed and interpreted the emerging themes within this framework.

Lived time – temporality, refers to squeezing time around the many activities of life, as van Manen (1990) summarised "Lived time is the time that appears to speed up when we enjoy ourselves, or slow down when we feel bored during an uninteresting university lecture or when we are anxious, as in a dentist's chair." (p. 104). This time is "subjective" not the "objective" time of a clock or calendar. My participants provided many examples of their experience of subjectivity of time; whether it was waiting online for a response from someone or getting lost in time while responding to others online or reading an interesting article. For participants subjective time influenced how connected they felt at any one moment.

Lived space is where the life as a student or a tutor is lived; a space that may be physical and located in a space provided by the university, where a tutor lives his/her teaching life, or the space which is home. As van Manen (1990) explains "Home is where we can *be* what we *are*. After having spent time somewhere we get up to "go home." [...] lived space is the existential theme that refers us to the world or landscape in which human beings move and find themselves at home" (p. 102, his emphases). For distance online students and tutors with a space that is digital *and* at home, new tensions might arise.

Van Manen (1990) described the *lived body* or corporeality as the "phenomenological fact that we are always bodily in the world. When we meet another person in his or her landscape or world we

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meet that person first of all through his or her body” (p103). When the body is digital and unseeable, can we really ‘see’ that person or ‘know’ her/him? This existential is germane to understanding how not seeing others “visually” in an online environment might impact on the way we see them textually or the way in which image is used.

Lived other or relationality refers to lived relation(ships) and the way in which we maintain them. With regard to online study, working with other formal or informal groups is commonplace, and with the increasing use of technologies to develop online groups, maintaining relationships with non-contributors may become an issue impacting upon student engagement.

Using this as an analytical framework to gauge the importance of the emerging themes of engagement was not without its problems and complexities, as “The four existentials ... can be differentiated but not separated” (van Manen, 1990, p. 105). However, by analysing the meanings the themes had for participants in terms of lived time, space, body and relations, I hoped to understand the ways in which these themes were important to the ways my participants engaged.

Table 2 below outlines the manner in which I “temporarily differentiated” (van Manen, 1990) the lived experiences. The two perspectives referred to previously, being an online *distance student* and being a distance *student online*, were not independent and indeed merged with each other in the participants’ experiences. However, thinking of them as differentiated helped me as I reflected upon my participants’ lived experiences, and considered how well the emerging themes represented what was happening for the students. The first perspective focussed on being a *distance online student*: that is grouping participants’ reflections which related to their perceptions of life as a student, remote from campus whilst using a significant range of technologies. The second perspective focused on the times when the participants were actually online and studying (*distance online students*); with the aim of uncovering their perceptions of engagement in a digital world where new experiences and understandings may develop and challenge their preconceptions. Whilst none of the questions listed in the Table was asked directly of the participants, they enabled me to set some boundaries for my analysis to make it manageable.

Table 2

Distance, Online Student Lifeworld

<div>perspectives</div> <div>lifeworld</div>	Perspective of a <i>distance online student</i>	Perspective of a <i>distance student online</i>
lived time (temporality)	<p>How has being a distance online student changed the way time is experienced and when life is lived? Over the:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> time span of my study; or organization of my semester; or the days of the week. 	<p>How is time spent when being 'logged in' to MyLO?</p> <p>Does the experience of time change while online?</p>
lived space (spatiality)	<p>What is it like to be a University, teacher education student when not attending on-campus?</p> <p>What is an office or study like now - digital spaces in physical places?</p>	<p>Participants' digital spaces in MyLO.</p> <p>What is the perception of study space like online?</p>
lived body (corporeality)	<p>How do I portray myself as a distance online student?</p> <p>How does one construct a sense of the person when one is unseen?</p> <p>On what basis can one physically differentiate between unseen people?</p>	<p>How do I meet the experience of the online world of MyLO?</p> <p>How do I develop and maintain my student image in my online world?</p>
lived human relations (relationality)	<p>How do I, as a student, relate to my fellow students, family, friends and work colleagues?</p>	<p>How do I relate to my peers and tutors in an online environment?</p> <p>Why can younger students be so annoying?</p>

Inherently the analysis was an iterative process where developing themes were then aligned with the collective perceptions to see if they truly represented what the students were saying they were experiencing. This process led to the development of the textual representation of the student perceptions of their engagement. The hermeneutic circle-spiral (Schwartz-Shea & Yanow, 2012) which began with the development of the method through to reflection upon and evaluation of the data reinforced the iterative (and sometimes messy) nature of this design.

3.6 Representation

Whilst a purpose of large scale studies is to identify the characteristics of the 'average' distance online student and their engagement, this investigation aimed to ensure that a range of student (and indeed tutor) perspectives were generated so that the richness of the experience of the participants was represented. As discussed previously, the initial stage in this process was to ensure a range of students and tutors participated in the research, and subsequently to represent their perceptions truthfully in this dissertation. I acknowledge that my choice of textual form, language and features has shaped the meanings, both presented and received.

As I have stated previously, I brought to this investigation a sense that much of what I had read in the research literature about distance online learning, whilst helpful did not necessarily match what I had heard from distance online students and those who were tutoring them as I worked in this environment. The emphasis in the literature, particularly as it related to student engagement, seemed to privilege learning outcomes and on-campus students. Hence to give the distance online student voice, I have chosen to include a significant level of direct interview transcription and monitored my bias in selection and non-selection in field notes in an effort not to skew the readers' received perspective. In addition, to provide some understanding of context I have incorporated my description of the environment in which the interviews took place.

Hermeneutic phenomenology acknowledges the importance of life experience in the individual's attribution of meaning to everyday phenomena. Asking my participants to reflect upon

engagement as a phenomenon was one way of acknowledging their experience and encouraging their voice, but doing so was not a straight forward matter. I took seriously the need to "...listen to the language spoken by the things in their lifeworlds, to what things mean in this lifeworld" (van Manen, 1990, p. 112). Therefore, in speaking with participants, I retained a sensitivity to their voice, not forcing a sense of engagement in terms of institutional and/or research definitions. One of my aims in this investigation was to give participants an opportunity to describe engagement in terms that they found meaningful and valid within their lifeworld, and I found they often took a more personal and emotional view of engagement than the definition elegantly articulated by Kahu: "a student's emotional, behavioural and cognitive connection to their study" (2014, p. 1). In fact it became obvious during successive interviews that students' understandings of engagement often came from their sense of its absence.

Researching the lived experience is at its core a textual experience (van Manen, 1990); taking a fundamentally hermeneutic approach, the working and reworking of the text, provides the outcome. The sequencing (and to some extent the spiral nature) of the final text reflects this iterativeness, and also represents a product of the framework which I used to develop meaning for the themes.

My use of quotes from the play "Educating Rita" (Russell, 1981) in some of my chapters aims to focus the reader on the difference in experience of distance students from their on-campus peers, even when their study is not fully technologically mediated. They served to emphasise the importance of the human experience in the mode of study. Similarly, the placement of specific participant quotes at the beginning of some chapters was an additional attempt to focus specifically on a student voice for the issues which might follow. I have not claimed to remove myself from the text, but hopefully have foregrounded my role in it.

3.7 Trustworthiness

Trustworthiness has a long and well established background in qualitative research (Lincoln & Guba, 1985), however the strongly interpretivist nature of my investigation needed an approach less reliant on positivist-quantitative concepts. I found the work of Schwartz and Yanow (2012) influential, using

their evaluative criteria developed “to assess how researchers deal with these characteristics in accounting for the research process on the basis of which they assert their knowledge claim” (p. 99).

These criteria are:

- the relationship of researcher identity to choice of and access to field research sites;
- researcher role(s) and the degree of participation in research involving participant observation;
- mapping the site for exposure and intertextuality;
- anticipating forms of evidence and analysis of their relationship to the research question; and fieldnote practices;
- reflexivity;
- data analysis strategies and techniques; and
- what is known in the qualitative methods literature as “member checking”.

(pp. 99 – 100).

I have listed the criteria, not to provide a check list for the reader, but as yet another reminder for my reflections and actions. Rather than view these criteria in a summative evaluative role, I accepted them as formative and iterative in nature and with the exception of “member checking¹⁴” applied them at relevant times, as the investigation progressed. As outlined earlier, my relationship and history with both distance online students and those tutoring them had led me to my investigation and the research questions. This experience assisted in identifying participants and negotiating access and contact with them through understanding many of the contextual parameters which impacted their participation and contribution. As a ‘student’ myself, familiarity with the university processes and systems which defined student and staff action underpinned the language of the discussion.

Conversely, because of their knowledge and experience, participants were familiar with the *role of researcher*. To some extent, this framed the interaction, although over time participants were more

¹⁴ The reason for this exclusion was discussed earlier in this chapter.

comfortable responding more directly and personally to the flow of the discussion; perhaps offering criticism of the others, or more personal comments and understanding the confidentiality which I would provide to their comments. This was critical to my investigation as the community from which the participants were drawn was small. Meetings in environments chosen by participants provided a level of comfort to both participant and researcher.

The selection of participants has been discussed elsewhere, but it is worthwhile reflecting on my approach to solicit participants through email. This removed any coercive factors from the study; participants wanted to contribute. My only role in selection was based on the pragmatics of availability and ensuring a gender/year/experience mix as far as possible, but subject to participant response. It also improved exposure to the range of perceptions, views and experiences - intertextuality. The mapping of email respondents to my solicitation enabled the selection of the widest range of participants for the small participant group size.

The experienced, interpretative researcher reading this dissertation will also detect my sensitivity to reflecting on the manner in which my own 'sense-making' (Schwartz & Yanow, 2012, p.100) practices such as maintaining field notes associated with the interviews helped in monitoring. Supervisors were also important in maintaining my sensitivity to the fact that the investigation was not about my experience, but rather those of the participants and pointing out the prism of my experience where it appeared.

3.8 Impact

As discussed in Chapter Two, there are some significant issues with research into the impact of ICT on anything in higher education including student engagement. A key issue for me is that when researchers considered impact, it was viewed as the degree to which quantifiable changes in cognitive academic outcomes (on content based tests) or students' perception (rated on teacher/researcher developed scales) could be measured (e.g. Coates, 2007; Phillips, Maor, Cumming-Potvin, Roberts, Herrington, Preston, & Moore, 2011; Brint, Cantwell & Hannemann, 2008;). That is, impact was seen as an objective outcome, not one that is defined by participant cohort members.

This study does not claim to represent the views of some large group or sub-group of people so that generalised outcomes might be determined, rather it aimed to investigate the manner in which this small group of students perceived that they engage with tutors, peers, the course, the institution and the technology and the subsequent impact which that technology had on their engagement. In essence this is an aspect of the 'soft outcomes' for which Zepke and Leach (2010) called and as Finlay (2012) pointed out provides single cases which "may offer insight into individual essences (as opposed to typical or universal essences)" (p. 21). However should the experience of any of the participants resonate with someone else, then hopefully it may assist in gaining a greater understanding of the experience of others.

The impact of this investigation was, therefore, not only in the way in which the findings could be applied to other contexts, but rather how much they could intensify the readers own experience, by providing a mirror on her/his own world. In this respect, while not a fictionalised story, I believe that the strength of the findings can be viewed with respect to their illuminating effect - in the way they foregrounded the previously unnoticed perceptions of the participants (van Mannen, 1990).

3.9 Limitations and other issues for consideration from the research design

As with any research endeavour, there are a number of limitations, issues and caveats which I need to articulate here. By raising them from the background I hope to offer pre-emptive clarification of them, so that they do not become a later distraction.

3.9.1 Self-selection: Why did these participants choose to be a part of this investigation?

Several hundred emails requesting participants for this investigation were distributed to students. With less than half of the student cohort being able to meet the participation criteria, approximately thirty students both expressed interest in participating and met the criteria.

This raises the question: *Were the people who were interested in being a part of this investigation*

similar in some way, and were they representative of the cohort? I know from the interviews that those who ended up as the student participants were all academically motivated and reasonably high achievers. In the rare cases where two participants had ‘dropped’ units, the reasons related to ill-health or changed family or work commitment rather than academic difficulties. Each participant student was interested in what I was doing and expressed a desire to contribute in the hope of improving the experience for other students. Two of the participants were considering postgraduate studies themselves through an Honours year. This was an example, albeit exceptional, of the level of the intrinsic motivation and engagement of the groups of participants.

In a similar way, the tutors who participated were interested in issues of teaching and learning online and all expressed a desire to learn ways to improve their skills and knowledge in the area.

To summarise, there was an intrinsic interest in the investigation expressed by all participants which was tied to improving their skills, their experience of teaching or learning, or the experience of their peers. This interest in the investigation supported the quality of engagement with it, adding to my pleasure in interviewing them. However, the self-selection of the participants needs to be considered when reading this dissertation.

3.9.2 Lack of focus on a specific technology

As I have described in Chapter Two, many studies relating to impacts of technology in education have tended to choose a specific technology and study its impact. Such studies were clearly focussed on a technology and its impact, as expressed through the outcomes, rather than focussing on the person using the technology and their relationships with it. This investigation does not identify any specific technology or explore how it is experienced by students.

While, for the most part, the university’s learning management system (MyLO) is central to this investigation, the use of hardware, for example smart phones, tablets, laptops and even standard telephones was also part of the discussion where relevant or when raised by participants. However, it

is the impact which technologies have on student engagement, as perceived by the students and their tutors that is the main way that technologies contribute to the intent of the investigation.

3.10 Conclusion

I have argued thus far that research based on survey instruments has been found wanting when studying distance online student perceptions of student engagement particularly in terms of its representativeness. This investigation aimed to understand the participants' perceptions of student engagement as they study online, in the distance mode by researching their lived experiences. I have, however, accepted prevailing definitions of student engagement as a starting point for my research, thus avoiding the temptation to create a disconnect with other research by ignoring existing definitions and establishing a new or alternate definition within the context of this study.

Deciding upon an interpretive design, allowed me to provide a more detailed and personal view of student engagement with respect to this group of participants. With this decision, however, came the responsibility of accepting the constraints, procedures and protocols that underpin the integrity of the whole project. I have described these here and applied them to the context to enable you, the reader to test for yourself whether I have met the standard.

In developing an understanding of student engagement and the implications of technology for it in distance online learning, this investigation has chosen a research design less used, but demonstrably fit for purpose.

Chapter Four: Introducing the Participants

4.1 Introduction

In his insightful play (and later movie), *Educating Rita*, Willy Russell (1981) paints a vivid and sometimes confronting image of the significant changes which take place in a young working class woman's life as she studies with the then fledgling Open University of the United Kingdom (OUUK). It is a story of self-discovery, not only for her, but for her tutor. While Russell does not specifically canvass technological issues relating to the distance experience (indeed it is the face-to-face experience of Rita's relationship with her tutor on a university campus that underpins the story line), the powerful individual and social transformative forces which come into play through such non-traditional approaches to higher education are cast in stark relief. These transformative forces are not solely tied to courses and institutions, but also act on and through the tutors, the students and their peers, family and friends, and the learning environments in all their forms.

University study for Rita as a mature age student is more than the 'rite of passage' that she sees in the younger students she meets on campus. It may have begun as a desire for life change or improvement, but it becomes a journey of discovery and renewal (for her and her tutor Frank). The alertness of Frank, to the possibility of transformation, and his willingness to support her engagement with her new life of study, impact significantly on Rita's metamorphosis. In her engagement with the processes of her study and the people involved, Rita experiences her education as a phenomenon both in its different parts as it relates to her peers, tutor and family, and as a whole.

In contrast to this, the literature review (Chapter 2) shows that much of the recent research into higher distance education, particularly that which comes from a technology perspective, focuses on learning outcomes, student perceptions of their learning experience with specific pieces of learning technologies or comparisons of improvements in learning approaches. The methodological approach of this investigation privileges a personal, individual, experiential and relational view of technology and its impacts, in contrast to many of the earlier studies into student engagement (Agre as cited in

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Friesen, 2009). It also allows some observations to be made about the impact of the use of technology on tutors.

None of the participant students in this investigation has experienced Rita's conflicts. However, there are elements of her situation to be found in their experience. They are similar to Rita in that they were new to higher education. Also, while not able to name engagement as an experience, each participant speaks of characteristics which fall under a description of engagement.

However, before investigating student engagement, tutor, and technology interaction, one issue regarding research design needs to be addressed: that is the nature of the participants. As discussed in Chapter Three, I am not dealing with a representative group of participants. They are, in effect, self-selected, so who they are becomes an important part of this investigation. Insights into their life stories help understand their current place and experience. In Heideggerian terms (van Manen, 1990), their *lifeworlds* need to be recognised, reflected upon and affirmed as a significant and meaningful part of the investigation. Their positive response to the email request for participants already brands them as having some level of engagement with their studies and some desire to make a contribution to my research into student engagement. For example, Wanda said that she intended to continue postgraduate studies herself and was keen to discuss my experience and test some of her ideas to see if she was (in her terms) being realistic. Tricia, feeling very isolated, offered to be a participant in the hope of contributing to an improvement of the course experience for others and increasing her contact with others in the academic enterprise. In essence, each student participant entered the interviews with a positive attitude, an interest in helping and a desire to engage with me and my investigation. They are introduced below so that at least some part of their background, their experience of distance education and technology and its impact on their engagement can be more clearly understood in context.

While student participants and the technologies which they use in their learning are central to this investigation, the role which tutors play in student engagement cannot be ignored. Technology needs to be considered within its human context (Idhe, 1990) and tutors along with peers, family,

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friends and colleagues comprise a significant portion of that human context. A technology cannot be considered as an inert object. At the point of use by the tutor, they are as one. So at least a basic knowledge of the tutor is also important to fully understanding this investigation. Therefore, there will be an introduction to the participant tutors following the introduction of the participant students.

The participants in this study may have partitioned their lives into various roles: for example student and parent; tutor and spouse. The fact that they are conscious of their movement between roles and the impact of each on the other becomes yet another part of the dynamic of this investigation.

4.2 Introducing the participants: Students

We're the sort of people who didn't go to university.

[participant student]

Wanda

Wanda lived in a village (becoming a satellite suburb) on the outskirts of a major Australian city. She worked in a local private school providing administrative support services, but over a period of time had begun to work also with children displaying behavioural problems. She believed that she has been required to act at a level beyond her previous training. She expressed some concerns about the level and type of teaching intervention which she was undertaking as she was not, at the time of interview, a registered teacher. She looked forward to moving into a full teaching role and felt that she was growing into that role. With the studies she was soon to complete behind her, she stated that she was confident in this new and changing role.

After completing year 12 and beginning (but not completing) a two year teaching diploma at a small teachers college she spent a number of years in full-time home duties including child raising and some general part-time clerical work. She returned to study to undertake a Diploma of Community Services – Youth Work which had been completed four years before beginning her Bachelor of Education. With her children now in post secondary studies she saw her own return to study as in some ways a “role model” for them.

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She presented at both interviews as organised and driven. As the first in her family of origin to attend university she came across as very conscious of the class and cultural transitions which are associated with her undertaking university study as well as the family tensions which it engenders.

While not being able to attend a university campus, except for two residential schools early in her studies, she had attended a number of orientation days and university staff visitations to the nearby metropolis. As will be discussed later, she has very fond memories of those residential schools and attributes to them the formation of some long term collegial friendships. She appears to have few local peers, although staff at the school where she works have been very supportive and provide access to relevant and in her term *irrelevant* resources.

Wanda seemed confident in herself and her academic achievement. She proudly pointed out that she has never had to drop a unit of study. Indeed, at the time of the first interview she was seriously considering an Honours year and working on a project/topic idea. At the subsequent interview she explained that she had progressed to Honours and was keen to outline her study to me. Her results over her course have clearly been sound. Her opinions are strong, yet balanced with her experience and recently acquired knowledge. Her disdain for the non-directed and *frivolous* (as she perceived it) *younger students*, who spent time discussing non-academic issues online, was obvious to me from her comments, and not denied by her.

Her home and study (a transformed bedroom) was minimalist and tidy. We completed the first interview within the hour so that she could return to work and yet I felt the time was neither rushed, nor the discussion superficial. The second interview, which went well beyond the hour, was conducted at seven o'clock in the evening. By then, the family dinner had been prepared, completed and tidied away, so that the house was pristine.

With access to technology at work and home (all family members have their own computer) and with her own smart phone, Wanda stated that she was very comfortable with the use of technology at home, at work and with her study.

Tricia

In her late twenties to early thirties, married with no children, Tricia lives in a very remote location. Indeed, her remoteness and the feelings of isolation which such a location engender pervaded our interviews and appeared to focus her comments on the negatives of her experience: she is the only participant who identifies herself as disengaged, in the first round of interviews. Yet, the passion with which she spoke might have indicated much more intensity and engagement than she acknowledged. In common with most of the other participants, Tricia is the first of her family of origin to attend university, eleven years after completing her Victorian Certificate of Education (VCE)¹⁵. Her only other study since then had been in wood machining.

She came to live at the remote location with her husband who has family ties and was able to obtain work there. The feeling of the centrality of her husband's work and family ties pervades both interviews. She is a shift-worker while studying and identifies a continuing tension between work (and the *good money* she earns) and her studies. Because of her isolation, our interviews were conducted on Skype which, while technically adequate, appeared to contribute to a sense of frustration and the feeling of remoteness for the participant. Twice she made reference to Skype being useful but not like being there.

In spite of a difficult time at high school, her love of music and the gentle nudging of a local teacher had brought her to the Bachelor of Education course. However, even after more than ten units of study, during the first meeting, she expressed uncertainty as to whether she wants to be a teacher, or is studying merely to get a job in a difficult local job market. This ambivalence belied the passion for teaching/sharing music (with children) that I perceived was never far from the surface.

During the first interview, Tricia presented as one of the more enigmatic participants in this investigation. Initial impressions were of a pragmatic, self-interested and highly critical student. However, many of the problems which she raises, at least in my understanding, appear to have substance and be legitimate issues for her. Her continuing to study in the face of these problems

¹⁵ The VCE is a certificate recognising completion of high school in the state of Victoria, Australia.

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(perceived or real) demonstrates a significant level of dedication and persistence. The second interview evidenced a more sanguine attitude to her studies and more enthusiasm for teaching following a positive *prac experience*¹⁶. During my second round of participant interviews she was the only participant to enquire as to what changes in the Bachelor of Education online practice might have arisen from the information that she had provided in her first interview.

Technologically, she appeared to have more than adequate hardware and software which she also used in maintaining contact with her family and friends, most of whom lived some distance away (interstate). However, during our first interview she referred to issues with using *Openword* and translation to Microsoft Office, bandwidth and other technology frustrations. One of my frustrations with our interviews was her continually returning to technology problems and issues. Tricia's study space was a dedicated area. However, she mentioned that when her husband is working late shifts, she uses the kitchen table as a desk.

Bill

At approximately thirty to thirty-five years old, Bill had worked at many jobs in his life: mostly physical. Having left school following year eleven, he had tried a range of jobs from trades to retail. At the time of our first interview, he was working as a teachers' aide, which meant he was working and studying in the same professional field – a position which he felt was of great benefit to him. He felt that his day to day interactions with both staff and students made the application of his learning easier and more meaningful as his colleagues were very supportive and provided him with *teaching experiences* well beyond what might have been expected as a *prac experience*.

For him, the other important benefit of his job was that he could also be at home in the afternoons with his (at the time of the first interview) two children, who were of pre-primary and primary school age. He saw himself as giving at least a similar level of care to his children as his partner. However, he stated that her shift-work made his scheduling of child care, work and study a demanding task.

¹⁶ This experience underlined the importance of being aware of the relationship between the students' current, or recent, experience and their response and interactions in the interviews.

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Another perceived benefit of his job was his ability to use a school office and some school resources in his study program. Given these expressed benefits, for me it was noteworthy to find out when arranging our second interview that he had quit his job to focus on completing his degree in the minimum time and caring for a recently born daughter. As our first interview had been in a cluttered, shared office at Bill's school, his quitting his job meant that our second interview was at Bill's home. For me, his home reflected his relaxed but focussed attitude to his study in its open plan design and clean but not over-organised presentation.

As an interstate student, Bill had never been to any of the university campuses; however he had attended one of the local orientation sessions in the metropolis about an hour's drive away. Prior to enrolling in the Bachelor of Education, Bill had completed two Open Universities Australia¹⁷ (OUA) units as a form of preparation for study and testing of his abilities and motivation. Before that, it had been fifteen years since he left high school. His high school experience had not been a positive one, although he seemed to feel that this had been more to do with his inability to engage or see a future, than any skill or ability problem.

Now approaching the end of his course, he was feeling tired but still enthusiastic about the impact of study on his life. Bill was very comfortable with technology and like other participants saw its use in his study as an extension of its use in everyday life. Bill was keen to tell me that between our first and second interviews he had upgraded to a smart phone.

Like some other participants, Bill expressed annoyance (a number of times) with technology problems which took time away from study, and those other students who seemed not to want to work as hard as he did, or were less focussed than he.

Ida

Ida is in her early forties. With three children, all at high school, a full time shift-work position in the retail industry, with staff management responsibilities and living in a rural setting fifteen minutes drive from her local town, she felt that her life was *full and busy*. Her husband works mainly from

¹⁷ Open Universities Australia is a consortium of Australian universities which provides full fee paying units of study in a distance, online mode with no entry requirements. (<http://www.oua.edu.au>)

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home but travels regularly, leaving her with the majority of home and family duties. Although she lives less than an hour's drive from the university campus, her busy life of work, maintaining a home and ferrying children means that she very rarely visits.

She finished her formal schooling at year eleven, but has completed some Technical and Further Education (TAFE) study since then. However, before beginning her education degree, it had been more than ten years since she had undertaken any formal study.

Her home, where our interviews took place, is modern, large, well designed and on an established, well developed and managed rural acreage (more than ten acres). Filtered coffee was provided on a large family dining table in a well-lit, north facing family room from which could be seen a well organised and equipped study/office. Her rural location meant that she relies on a satellite link for internet access. This was the cause of slow data movement and problematic connections.

The teenage children while present in the house during our meetings, went about their business either watching television (in the TV room) or making coffee in the open kitchen adjacent to the family room, only interrupting a couple of times to ask about something to eat or clarifying a forthcoming social (i.e. transport) arrangement.

While juggling her schedule meant that Ida had withdrawn from some units over the course of her study, the reason she gave for this withdrawal was "just too many units" enrolled for the commitments she had in that semester rather than any specific difficulties with the content or tutors involved – a pragmatic decision. Having completed more than half of her course by the time of our second interview, she felt that she had a clear understanding of what workload she can juggle for the semester depending on husband, children and work demands.

Ida had a practical and relaxed approach to our discussion. Happy to help, she was hopeful that the outcome of my investigation might lead to some improvements in the provision of the online courses for the next round of students and a better understanding of their contexts and issues. She was the first of her family of origin to undertake university study, but did not see it as a defining issue for herself or the rest of the family. She was keen to begin teaching rather than continuing to

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study as she felt that she could make a contribution to her local community through better education provision.

Aside from the problematic satellite internet connection, Ida was competent with technology and any problems were referred to her husband (if he was home) who worked in the information technology field. She had her own computer (which was shared with other family members from time to time), but at the time of the interviews did not have a smart phone.

Rhonda

Meeting Rhonda in a coffee shop presented opportunities and problems. Meeting away from home was important in this case as her husband had been unwell and demanding of her time. However, the excessive noise in the coffee shop meant that recording (and hence transcription) of her interview was more difficult than for the other participants.

In her late twenties, Rhonda presented as the most trendily dressed of the participants¹⁸. Her demeanour throughout the interview was focussed and serious. A young mother of two from a family involved in higher education, she came to the course with significant experience in the private sector including Technical and Further Education (TAFE) qualifications in business administration. While she had completed high school, her final years had lacked academic focus (when asked why, she said that this was mainly due to her *interest in boys*). Her desire to teach arose from her involvement in an issue at a school which her children had attended where a student with a significant disability was not receiving (what Rhonda believed to be) adequate support. She had stepped up to assist and had become interested in teaching and working with children. This led to her enrolment and an often expressed (during the interview) ongoing commitment to teaching.

While up to the time of the first interview she had not withdrawn from any units of study, the recent serious illness of her husband was putting a significant strain on her study program. However, with significant planning and support from peers and tutors she was coping. Examples of how she

¹⁸ Whether this was because we met in a coffee shop or she was more likely to dress-up was not assessable by me. My suspicion derived from our interview is that her presentation image is more sophisticated and managed than other participants; although I am unsure what that might mean to the investigation, if anything.

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was using technology during that time indicated significant technology access (personal laptop, tablet and smart phone), skill level and considerable organisational talents.

While she lived within an hour's drive of campus, she rarely attended as her busy schedule did not allow it. Instead she had developed, over the years of study, a significant 'local' peer group of similarly situated, focussed and supportive people who met locally from time to time and seemingly, from her comments, were in very regular text, discussion board and phone contact.

She, like some other participants, articulated very specific characteristics which she preferred in other students. *Younger*, less academically focussed students were avoided and criticised. Time wasting in online discussion boards and non-reciprocation of ideas and academic effort were also a point of some negative comment. To some extent, she had concatenated these issues into a concept of *lack of real life experience* in younger (particularly on-campus online¹⁹) students.

Just prior to our second interview Rhonda had been forced, by her husband's and then child's ill health, to withdraw from study for that semester, and because of time constraints, not participate in the second interview. However, she expressed a strong intention to return to study upon their anticipated recovery.

Geraldine

While, at over fifty years of age Geraldine was the oldest participant in the investigation, she still shares a number of characteristics with many of the other participants. For example, she is the first in her family of origin to attend university; her pathway to university was not direct entry from high school as she had left school at year ten to go to work.

She had recently (three years before the interviews) moved with her family to the state looking for a lower cost lifestyle and therefore had bought a house in a remote community some one-and-a-half hours (120 km) from the nearest university campus. With a husband unable to work for health reasons, it had fallen to her to be the bread winner. Completion of Certificates (III) in Community

¹⁹ These are students who are either full time or part time, on-campus students undertaking one (or more) units fully online.

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Services and Business Studies had not led to gainful employment that had interested her, so she had decided to enrol in the Bachelor of Education.

A number of times during the first interview she stated that her parents had impressed upon her that they (her family) were not *the sort of people* who went on to further study. While this may seem to be a statement less about ability than class and culture, when this idea was raised with her, Geraldine was not so sure and indicated lingering doubts about her academic abilities.

Her rare visits to the major centre with a university campus were tied to shopping and study needs so as to gain maximum cost benefit. Being in her first year, Geraldine was still conscious of her poor study skills, particularly regarding assignment writing, and looked to her tutor for positive feedback. In spite of her lack of self-confidence, she had successfully completed four units in the first semester. However, time constraints had meant that she had dropped one unit in second semester.

As we spoke, while she evidenced a certain personal sadness in her story, I also detected a pride in her achievement to date. The struggle of interpreting a new world led her to be uncertain about her place in it. However, satisfaction that her efforts to date had “inspired” her daughter to enrol in further study and Geraldine’s sense that she was providing a very positive image to her granddaughter cultivated a sense of achievement.

Geraldine presented as comfortable with technology. She felt that her skills were only adequate, but their continuing development had provided freedom to be able to communicate more richly with her family elsewhere in Australia. She had been largely self-taught and had had problem in learning how to get the best out of MyLO. However, the growing knowledge of and reliance on technology was evidenced in the second interview, when the initial discussion focussed on the problems which she had been having with her connectivity. Her response to my request for her to write a story about what had happened and how she felt about it is discussed in Chapter Six.

She was developing a small (and I suspect from how she described it, similarly aged) learning group online, phone and some face to face meetings to which she looked for support, a need for a sense of identity, belonging and connectedness.

Mary

In her mid to late thirties, Mary was slightly different from most participants in my investigation in that she had completed year 12. From school she moved directly to Teachers' College to begin a three year Diploma of Education and then taught for a few years. Her return to study after a number of years was basically a move enabling her to obtain a permanent position and improve prospects for her family.

She lived interstate from the university and had never attended any of its campuses, but had attended a number of orientation and support days in a metropolis about 70km away from her home in a rural/commuter village.

While Mary is the first in her family of origin to attend tertiary education, siblings had followed her into tertiary education and then again followed her into continuing study after she enrolled in the Bachelor of Education. In fact, she spoke of competition between her and her sister with regard to completing a degree. She felt that her studying had been an incentive for her children to pursue further education. The children were studying either at TAFE college or university.

As she was coming towards the end of her degree, she was also considering honours or postgraduate study. A number of times during the interviews she mused over the change in her attitude which had brought her to her current situation. However, there were some personal issues which might mitigate further study at that time. These tensions related to all of her family wanting her to spend less time studying and more time with them.

While apologising a number of times for the state of disarray of her home, (which I felt was in a quite reasonable state) she emphasised, like a number of other participants, that housework took a distant second place to study during semester and was a job for the inter-semester breaks. She had a relaxed and hospitable style dealing with questions from a teenage son, which occurred twice during our first interview, in an easy manner.

Because of work commitments and illness, a suitable time could not be found for a second face to face interview. A Skype option was suggested by Mary who was very comfortable using that

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technology. She explained that she used it to communicate with family, friends and study peers. I note that she felt comfortable in much more casual clothes for the Skye session than for the previous face to face interview.

Jane

Jane had a young family of five children under nine. She was in her early to mid thirties. Her home was located in a small semi-rural town which is fast growing into a commuter village because of its access to the nearby city and other facilities. Her home was fairly new and surrounded by similar houses in the development of standard suburban blocks. I was invited into her home with an apology for its untidiness, followed quickly with a statement that the end of semester (now at hand) was the big tidy-up time. Given the number and age of the children, and my perception of a clean and tidy home, I thought that the apology was perhaps more of a ritual than a necessity or a realistic assessment of the state of the house.

For the first interview, one of the children was not at home, but the others watched a DVD in a TV room; there was some disagreement over the programming which was quickly and decisively resolved by Jane during our discussion. Initially and superficially (for the first interview), I had a perception of chaos. However, as our interview progressed (and during the second interview), I became more aware of a high level of control and firm organisation. The way in which Jane was able to manage the children in a proactive manner while engaging in a coherent, thoughtful and reflective discussion impressed me.

Jane was a “stay-at-home mum”, as I was told a number of times. However, as the discussion progressed it became evident to me that she had a full range of voluntary activities, focussed mainly on a local church congregation in which she and her husband were both active. For her it included running the *Ladies Group* and co-ordinating the provision of food for those in the community with an emergency need. A cup of coffee was offered, accepted and quickly provided. A banana was found for the youngest child who was then effortlessly dispatched to an outside enclosed play area, under surveillance, but content to play for the rest of our interview.

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Jane was also the first member of her family of origin to attend university, and as became evident later; her continuing study was the cause of some friction between Jane and her husband, particularly at busy times. However, her intention to achieve her aim of teaching was perceived by me to be unequivocal. Until enrolling in the Bachelor of Education course, Jane had not undertaken any further study after leaving school early to support her family of origin. She had never withdrawn from any units of study, although she had been close sometimes, when things became busy.

A study 'nook' at one end of the open plan lounge/dining room/kitchen was Jane's study area. There was a dedicated space downstairs, but she preferred to study upstairs where she was *available* to the family.

Our second meeting was without all but the youngest child present. Again, a ritual of unnecessary apologies was undertaken, but the underpinning control and organisation of the household was evident to me.

Indigo

Of all the participants, Indigo was, for me the most difficult to understand in terms of obtaining an organised idea of her background. Having left school at the end of year eight to be a stay-at-home carer for her siblings on the death of her mother, she subsequently (since age 15), had lived independently. Now in her late forties, she presented as having had a *tough* life which she wore as a badge of honour. She had a direct approach to our interview. She now lived in a suburban home in an outer beachside suburb of a major city. She was a young grandmother with a second family of teenagers.

Indigo came to teaching from an information services background. She worked in a school environment as an IT support person based in the library. Her previous study experience before enrolling in the Bachelor of Education was the completion of a Diploma in Applied Science (Information Services) in the on-campus (face-to-face) mode.

Whilst our meeting time had been arranged and agreed, it took me a considerable time to get her attention when I arrived at her front door as she was on the phone speaking to a friend about a

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range of personal/social issues. Her teenage son, who was off to cycling practice let me in and let her know I was there. Our interview took place in the kitchen over a couple of cups of tea where she was quite disarming with her candour.

She had just begun her studies in the second half of 2011 and whilst she had had to withdraw from a unit, the cause had been an administrative error (regarding a pre-requisite unit). At the time of the first interview, she had not received any results although she had completed all of her assessments.

Of all the participants, she was the most techno-savvy (evidenced by the fact that she had been able to work out that her neighbour had *hacked her home wireless network!*). More than likely as a consequence of this, later discussion would show that she did not have a high opinion of the IT skills of some tutors.

While she had a study space, her laptop (relatively new) allowed her to *spread out around the house* to study and do house work at the same time. She also did some study at her work place.

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Table 3

Summary of Student Participants

Student	Approx. Age	Lives	Family	Discussion location	Other comments
Wanda	40+	Satellite suburb of major Australian city	Husband + two teenage children	Home, dining room table and patio	Full-time work at a local school. Motivated to do PG study.
Tricia	early 30s	remote	Partner	Skype (participant in kitchen)	Very remote, working part-time.
Bill	30/40	Satellite suburb of major Australian city	Wife + three children (all pre-primary)	School office and home lounge	Third child arrived while studying. Resigned teachers' aide job to focus on completing study.
Ida	40+	Fifteen minutes from local rural town	two teenage children at high school	Home, kitchen table	Husband often away with work; slow satellite connection. Working full-time.
Rhonda	20/30	Suburban, one hour drive from a UTAS campus	Husband + two school aged children	Local cafe	Ill husband - eventually caused deferment.
Geraldine	50+	Remote community 120 kilometres from a UTAS campus	Husband one child + grandchildren close by	Library study room on-campus	Ill-husband – needed to become bread winner. Satellite problems.
Mary	40+	Satellite suburb of major Australian city	Husband + teenage children	Home, lounge then Skype (Mary in her lounge)	Full-time work, personal technology user.
Jane	30s	Growing semi-rural town	Husband + five children under nine	Home, dining room/kitchen table	“stay-at-home-mum”. Large community involvement.
Indigo	late 40s	Satellite suburb of major Australian city	Husband + two teenage children at home + other children and grandchildren.	Home, dining table and lounge	IT background. Part-time work in school library.

4.3 Introducing the participants: Tutors

Charles, James, Connor, Albert and Emma responded to my request to provide insights into student approaches to, and engagement with study as distance students in an online environment²⁰. As with the participant students, this group can in no way be considered as demographically representative of the staff of the Faculty of Education. They range in age from early thirties to late fifties. They are all experienced (but to differing degrees) online unit designers, co-ordinators and tutors. Their respective on-campus offices were the venue for all interviews.

The units which they teach range through the disciplines of science, literacy, information technology and professional studies. Three of the tutors have experience in teaching in the distance mode only at the current university, with the other two also having taught in the distance mode at other Australian universities.

In general, their interests in participating in my investigation arose from their perception of the increasing prominence of online teaching within the Faculty. With one exception, there was an expressed element of using the discussions as an opportunity for the tutors themselves to reflect on their experiences in teaching online. It occurred to me that such a time or opportunity for reflection is not often afforded tutors. The constant array of evaluations of the student experience coupled with evaluations of student perceptions of teaching, with their associated ratings and rankings leaves little room for reflection without judgement.

However, one issue which became evident during the interviews is that none of the tutor participants articulated any specific, intrinsic interest in the distance mode or online environment: these modes are accepted as necessary, both in terms of being more inclusive and equitable and the Faculty's need to increase enrolments. That said, they were all committed to making the student experience as positive and productive as possible.

²⁰ The processes relating to their recruitment was discussed in Chapter 3, and the associated documentation found in the appendices.

James

James' book-lined office contained a desk and table, each of which was covered with books and/or paper. During our interview James sat behind his desk and presented with a 'no-nonsense' abrupt approach. He seemed to pride himself in being direct. My sense of our interviews was that he did not specifically differentiate between on- and off- campus students within his large online *classes*. In our discussions he often returned to the theme of the management and administrative issues which distance online teaching threw up for the tutor/unit co-ordinator rather than any contentious pedagogical issues. As an older tutor with significant distance education experience, James appeared to be the most concerned of the participant tutors about the implications of the university trying to increase enrolments and the resulting human resource issues.

He most clearly articulated an expressed sense of seeing the online experience as less than the face-to-face experience. However, this was at least in part due to the perceived extra administration required and the difficulties of dealing with students, exacerbated by the *clunky* technology. *Clunky* was his way of describing dealing with students through media that increased transactional distance (Moore, 1993) between himself and his students.

A number of times throughout the interview James raised issues regarding his increased work load and his belief in the lower academic ability of distance students in general and more specifically those in the Bachelor of Education course.

Albert

Albert was also one of the longer standing tutors interviewed. His office space was well organised and fully used, without books and papers piled on flat surfaces. He was generous with his time and during each interview, he moved from his desk to sit with me at a small table in one corner of the office.

Our interviews were focussed, with Albert keen to outline how his online unit was structured and functioned, based on his many years experience with computers in education. From this discussion, my perception was that his view of computers in education objectified them and their use.

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He also viewed elements of students choosing online as an easier option as an issue, but not as strident in his view as was James. Although he demonstrably had the best interests of his distance students in mind, Albert still identified face-to-face as his preferred mode. All comparisons which he provided during the interviews were based on face-to-face being the default, idealised position: the distance online option would always be second choice. This underpinning orientation was re-enforced by articulating the concept of *presentation* of materials as the key pedagogic approach within a highly structured online environment.

Emma

Emma's office was ordered and organised. Her desk was more centrally sited than other tutors' desks and the interview was conducted across it. She was the only female tutor to offer to be a part of this investigation who met the criteria. Being relatively new to the university, she was still coming to terms with MyLO and her development of technical skills appeared to be in the fore-front of her mind during our interviews, but she went to some lengths to evidence her distance education experience at another institution. However, at a deeper level she exemplified a theme of dissatisfaction with technology-mediated teaching. With respect to an online training course which she was undertaking as a trainee, she commented: *One of my colleagues said to me yesterday that we should do ... we were having a meeting together to have a conversation around the content and she said: "I have to stop doing things online because it's killing my soul: because I'm a human being." That was a really nice way of putting it. She said: "I'm stopping this interaction online. Whenever I can, I'm going to meet with human beings, because it's actually killing my soul." That's what she said. So that's interesting, isn't it?*

She indicated that the position taken by her colleague was one which she also held. The alienation of soul – that is the essence of being human - from the online experience would imply a perceived lack of humanity in the relationships which were developed in that environment. Alienation in this sense was defined by Mann (2001) as the antithesis of engagement. However, as the interview progressed, like many tutors, Emma evidenced an understanding of the possibility of

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change to pedagogies which might be more appropriate to technology-mediated teaching environments.

The interview with Emma also raised the possibility that tutors who have experienced distance online as undergraduates or postgraduates might provide different approaches in their own online teaching.

Connor

Before becoming an online tutor in the Bachelor of Education program Connor had been a high school teacher. He had experienced the previous version of MyLO²¹ and was coming to terms, technically, with the new version. His office did not have the number of books and photocopied pages which I had seen in other offices.

He saw teaching as a creative performance. Performativity for Connor in the face-to-face mode is the actor on stage in the lecture or tutorial. For the distance online mode it is the creativity of performance through the written word. As he gained experience of MyLO he intimated that he felt more able to use the environment as an extension of himself.

Connor presented as willing to experiment with his teaching and communications with students. His use of words in our interviews, considered and carefully chosen, led me to believe that he prided himself in the precision of his communication.

Charles

As a relatively new and younger tutor, Charles was coming to terms with, as he put it *the meaning of online*. On a number of occasions during our interview he intimated that learning about the different expectations of tutors and students and between different students had been part of his development as an online tutor.

Although Charles, by implying that extra effort needs to be made by the distance online students, highlights his perception of the exceptionality of this mode, he also indicates that realising this exceptionality has sensitised him to similar exceptionalities in the face-to-face mode. He felt that

²¹ The previous version had been on a WebCT™ platform rather than the current Desire2Learn™ version.

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his efforts to engage with students had been rewarded by their assisting him to know what it was like to be a distance online student, and that this had helped him improve his tutoring skills more broadly.

His office reflected his organised approach in its order and space. A separate small table placed to one side of the room was the site for both interviews.

Table 4

Summary of Tutor Participants

Student	Approx. Age	University Experience	D E Experience	Discussion location	Other comments
James	50+	Another university + UTAS	Significant	Office, over desk	Discussion returned to administrative and management issues
Albert	40/50	UTAS	Significant	Office, at table	IT focussed discussion
Emma	30/40	another university + UTAS	Some	Office, over desk	concern over technical and pedagogic skills
Connor	30s	UTAS	Limited	Shared office chair to chair	focussed on performativity
Charles	30s	UTAS	Some	Office at table	returned to meaning of online learning

4.4 Caveat

My efforts to maintain the confidentiality of the participant tutors means that I am limited in my descriptions of them. This should not be interpreted as a reflection on them. As my investigation unfolds, the reader will come to understand them more and appreciate their commitment to their profession.

Chapter Five: Students' Understandings of Their Experiences of Engagement

5.1 Introduction

From the point of view of researchers, institutions and policy makers, the views and definitions of student engagement tell only one side of the story. From the literature review I observed that there were a number of ways of structuring, classifying, typifying engagement and its many forms. As well as these more structured approaches, how the students themselves perceive their own engagement also needs to be investigated and understood. This gave rise to the research question:

What are initial teacher education students' perceptions of engagement as they study online in the distance mode?

With the broad range of experiences which comprise participants' engagement, I have grouped the discussion of these experiences around the three research sub-questions:

- *What do students understand of their experiences of engagement?*
- *In what ways do educational technologies impact student engagement? and*
- *How do tutor attitudes impact student engagement? (particularly in the context of a technology environment)*

Analysis is presented and discussed over the next three chapters, each chapter addressing one of the research sub-questions. As sub-question one addresses the core issue of this investigation, students' perceptions of engagement, it is discussed first (Chapter Five). Then two significant influences over students' perceptions of engagement, the impact of technology and tutors, are discussed in Chapters Six and Seven respectively.

Chapter Five begins by overviewing students' immediate responses to a question of their perceptions of engagement. Subsequently, these perceptions are contextualised within the participants' lived experience (van Manen, 1990) and are discussed further. Seven themes

foregrounded by this analysis are evidenced through re-engaging with the data are then outlined and then discussed in the remainder of this chapter.

5.2 Participants' immediate responses

What is the phenomenon of engagement from the participant students' perspectives and how do they experience it? That is: what does being engaged mean to them? While all participant students except one, had undertaken an AUSSE survey, they did not immediately make the connection between the survey and engagement. Indeed, initially at least as a concept, engagement seemed not to resonate with the student participants.

5.2.1 Students finding words for engagement

Hearing participant students speak about engagement without using the specific word, I was drawn back to Willy Russell's *Educating Rita*. While Rita did not use the term 'engagement', her commitment to her studies and to her future self was evident: she chose study over her marriage. She expressed a desire to move from where she was to some other place, which at that stage was undefined and unknown. Her passion for literature and desire for 'bettering herself' were indicators of her engagement with her studies. A good listener is attuned to her meaning.

Frank What's wrong? Rita.

Rita I got home from work, he'd packed my bag. He said either I stop comin' here an' come off the pill or I could get out altogether.

Frank Ogh ... fuck.

Rita It was an ultimatum. I explained to him. I didn't get angry or anythin'. I just explained to him how I *had* to do this. But he said it's warped me. He said I'd betrayed him. I suppose I have.

Frank *How* have you betrayed anyone?

Rita I have. I know he's right. But I couldn't betray meself. He says there's a time for education. An' it's not when y' twenty-six an' married.

(Russell, 1981, p. 33 - 34)

Rita's engagement with both her studies (grounded in her involvement in reading and literature) and the idea of being a student (wanting to connect with her tutor, Frank, and other students) had strengthened to the point where she was prepared to move away from that which was familiar and important to her. Both the desire to learn and the experience the life of a student were new to her. Her moving from one world, giving up a familiar place (her home and suburb) and close relations (her marriage, family and friends) to another, as yet unknown, world is encompassed by the word *engagement*, but it is a term and concept not known to her. Although she was developing a new identity as a student, she still spoke in the language of the world which she would, at some stage soon in the play, physically leave behind. Although perhaps not to the same extent, these experiences and feelings were perceived and expressed by students participating in this investigation. Like Rita, they did not necessarily have the technical vocabulary to articulate what they perceived to be happening to and around them. It is time to listen to them.

5.2.2 What does engagement mean to students?

In an effort to focus the interviews from the beginning, participants were offered the opportunity to outline how they defined student engagement. They did not respond to the concept of engagement as external or objective, but rather as how they, as individuals, related to their study.

Initially Tricia was not able to define engagement, but she felt that she knew it, or at least recognised its absence.

Tricia: *Well I guess I feel disengaged. I don't know what engagement is.*

A: *OK, what might disengagement be?*

Tricia: *I don't feel I am/I feel like I'm very isolated, I never see anybody, I never hear anyone's voice; you're probably the second person I've talked to in two years, from University. Um in a lot of ways I feel like I'm self educating. I'm given access to this material and I teach myself. It's a lack of conversation. There's no fluidity; it's so disconnected.*

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In terms of her lived experience, she was searching to develop relationships with the others who comprised her study world. The space (MyLO) was there (where she accessed her materials), but she had not been able to make verbal contact with others. She distinguished between the textual communication which she had in the discussion groups (a specific space for specific activities and relationships) and the verbal and visual, conversational contact which she was having on Skype with me. The perceived lack of *fluidity* added a temporal dimension to her desire for connectedness.

To a need for conversational or verbal communication Jane added her desire for a corporeal connection as being critical for her engagement:

Oh how I would define it is like having discussions on MyLO, that's good, um, but you can feel, because you don't know the faces and like you can put your profile picture up, but a lot of people haven't done that; they haven't worked out that you can actually do that, especially being in the first year they sort of don't explain that you can do that.

Indeed, a primary preference for being “bodily in the world” (van Manen, 1990, p. 103) was expressed by a number of participants. However, as will be evidenced later, it was acknowledged by the participants in a pragmatic way that the ability to be present through developing an image online met some of those corporeal needs.

Rhonda's view of engagement foregrounded her need for reciprocation from peers and tutors to feel engaged and she also pointed out that engagement with her study was not an all or nothing reaction:

Student engagement means to me that you feel like a person rather than a student number. And I find quite often in the correspondence it's very easy to get the sense of you are just a number and that there's nothing personalised about your interactions with your peers and your lecturers. It means to me that especially by studying online can be extremely isolating..... It's very easy for them [tutors] to make assumptions about you or the situation without really knowing or understanding the background.

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Her desire to be more than a number also hinted at the significance of the corporeal and relational in her understanding of engagement.

As a first response, Geraldine suggested that it was her involvement in her study that was one indicator of her engagement: *I think how engaged you are in your study. That's what student engagement is for me. Yeah, how involved you are.* How she generated that involvement was a much more complex issue, and difficult for her to explain. As her comments from a later interview indicated, her involvement was focussed on contribution and feedback; emphasising connectedness and reciprocity: *I think, it's [pause] being able to put your point of view across and then getting feedback on it and, discussing, yeah, discussion: and with your peers as well. I find that very helpful.*

At the beginning of his interview, Bill identified the importance he placed on unit materials (content), and his consequent connection with them which was generated along with professional socialisation, as fundamental to his engagement:

Yeah, sure, to be engaged I guess to me, well in an educational sense, I would suggest it's to be interested in what you're aiming to learn about ... to find some sort of connection with the material. [...] I guess if you're engaged with the material that's motivation in itself. Some sort of arh, I guess intrinsic I think is the word they use to describe it; intrinsic motivation- you're motivated to learn it because you want to learn it and you want to be a part of it. Yeah. [...] If you're not engaged you'll probably find it harder to commit.

His comments made clear that he identified the importance of feeling engaged to generating commitment to study.

Wanda, who was the longest standing student of all participants, was much more precise in articulating her understanding of engagement emphasising involvement, connectedness and reciprocity (that is being *in the loop*): *Being connected. Being interested. Being involved and feeling in the loop. ... I suppose to be engaged, my attention has to be captured first and then it needs to be held. And I think to hold it you need to feel that um, the person on the other end is engaging with you.*

Indigo's interaction with others and her own involvement with her study were also seen as central to being engaged, as she describes: *The way that we interact. Um, the way that I understand what's being delivered to me; and then the way that I respond.* Like the other participants she saw engagement as a two-sided phenomenon. Contributions needed to be made by her and others sharing the space, and for Indigo, there was an expectation that the tutor/institution would usually be the initiator of these contributions.

Mary's initial understanding of engagement focused on her contribution rather than that of the tutor or institution: *Well, because it's in relation to online study, I would say that it would be um, my level of participation and involvement in that process.*

Ida ties her engagement to her interest in, and comprehension of, the content:

Well engagement-wise, I've gotta be interested in it. For a start, firstly you've gotta know how to do something whatever's there. Well, like maths at the moment, a maths unit I'm doing ... there was one section I was unsure on how to do something. I do know now, after reading up on it and being shown online, but the next unit it just clicked straight away because I knew about it, I use it in everyday practice.

In the specific example she provided, both her interest and comprehension of the topic arise from the topic relevance to her *everyday practice*.

While participants found it difficult to provide precise definitions of student engagement, they were able to articulate their perceptions of being engaged (or not engaged) with their study (content), tutors, peers and the institution. Although on first reading vague, these understandings still carried consistent messages. Terms that began to recur in participants' initial perceptions were connection, responsiveness and involvement in study. There was also a focus on relationships between themselves, their tutors, peers and the content that they were studying.

These patterns continued through the interviews and in the subsequent analysis and will be re-visited. To understand these perceptions, their context needs to be understood. The next section of this chapter addresses contextualisation.

5.3 Engagement in the context of lived experience

To develop a context in which student perceptions of engagement can be understood, I used the framework of van Manen's four existentials (1990). These existentials form a basis of the participant's lifeworld. They can be differentiated and used as lenses to view what participants say. In this chapter they assist in bringing some order to the interview data and clarifying our understanding of student perceptions.

5.3.1 Lived time

Life in universities has rhythms and routines. However, these rhythms and routines do not necessarily apply to the day-to-day act of studying for students studying in the online mode. In contrast to attending as on-campus students, where lecture, tutorial and laboratory times are set by the institution, my student participants have schedules determined by their other (non-study) commitments and interests. Time is not merely about how many hours per week are spent in study; it is expanded and contracted by existing routines, emerging priorities and immediate demands. Time allocation is an ongoing, pragmatic negotiation based on a series of compromises. Times for lectures, tutorials, accessing readings or e-publications are malleable for participants so they are the times most likely to be changed. Not only does time seem to speed up or slow down, it can be stretched or compressed to fit the needs of the individual and her/his context.

From the data, lived time for the student participants appeared as a complex concept. While all participants identified the temporal flexibility which distance online study provided as one of the major, if not the primary, reason for studying in this mode, it also presented problems of new temporal determinants, and subsequently accepting responsibility for their own time management. Whether on a daily, weekly or semester basis, the rationale underpinning scheduling their study time was based, as much as possible, in their personal context. As Tricia's experience exemplified, sudden changes demanded a reconfiguration of routines, and study was the first to suffer: *This year I got a job*

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and that really threw everything into the air. Now I am over committed and I'm finding that study is the thing that is getting squeezed in around everything else.

Tricia was offered work and family economics forced her to accept, although the timing was not opportune.

Similarly, Ida understood the flexible nature of time in her life as a student:

'Cause I do a lot of things for them [family]. I still work around them; not so much my husband, but the kids - always had to work around them, what sporting things after school: just the normal things that people do these days.

Ida knew that there were certain activities that afforded down-time from family duties: this down-time provides an opportunity to study.

Lived time had yet another dimension for student participants. That is, the period of time during which they studied. Day-to-day time was enveloped in the future-oriented idea that the time put aside for study contributed to a desired outcome. They saw future gains, be they improvements in identity and image (the reinterpreting and re-representing of oneself), financial rewards or increasing control over their destiny. Time lost now from being with family and friends, from recreation activities and work for example, would produce better future outcomes including better control over future time use. When Mary says *I think I'll be a better teacher*, it is because she feels that investing her time now will improve her professional skills for the future.

Lived time was in caught between the present, the need to have an income, and future ambitions. This represented a pivotal time for participants balancing more immediate gratification with potential gains as Tricia describes:

My boss puts me down for too many shifts and she won't take no for an answer. I guess it is a real power struggle – the lure of, will I go somewhere today and make money or will I say: no I would not like to make money today; I would like to sit home and stare at my computer and work for my future.

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She echoed the thoughts of many of the participants. Each participant mentioned the time it took as a part-time student, the pressure of the short term rewards of work and socialising as opposed to the long term commitment to become a teacher and the subsequent perceived rewards.

Within the context of lived time, then, time itself becomes a 'bargainable' quantity: playing off long and short term costs and benefits against each other. One participant, Bill, actually stopped working to study full-time to get to his endpoint – becoming a teacher – more quickly, as he explained: *This year I've pulled the pin on working at schools. So I'm a full time student now, I guess; and father. [...] I just wanted to be so sure of this last year that I, I felt that getting away from work and just being able to focus solely on my studies and my family, were the important parts.*

After a long time of looking forward to being a teacher, Bill was finally getting there. When we spoke last, he was completing his final unit and, after years of juggling work, family, recreational and social commitments could see the end. While many could empathise regarding the difficulty of juggling time priorities, very few people close to him could share the specific experiences that Bill has had as a distance online student.

Lived time was equally important when student participants considered when they studied. There were a range of approaches. Wanda and Geraldine exemplified a structured approach to time, developing a strict routine to control how time is "used". Wanda provided details:

Every night seven o'clock in there – that's it. And I usually get most of it done so that, unless there's assignments on/ Well Mondays you know you open up that week's unit do the weekly tasks, um, see what reading's you've got to do, like I was doing three units a semester so Monday'd be this unit; Tuesday that unit and Wednesday that unit: and then you'd get the tasks done for each one. Thursday and Friday you can get any [discussion] board work that needed to be done, done and if there were assignments due, the board work stops and the assignments are the focus and just the next week, start it again.

Similarly, while Geraldine did not have as strict a work timetable as Wanda, she still had a regular routine: *[If I'm not away from home] usually by nine, or half past nine I'm online and then I'll have a break*

over lunch and maybe for a little bit longer over lunch. Sometimes it's 'til about 3 or 4, because I've found that that time of the day is my very lethargic time of day. So, in the morning I can study really good, and then in the evening or later at night I can study really good. So basically, that's my routine.

Most participants worked week by week, keeping pace with weekly lectures. However, there was often an expressed tension between these two 'time zones'. This was a fight for control over time. That is to say, the time student participants scheduled for study and the time schedule set out in the unit and by the tutor. Because the participant students appreciated the flexibility of online study, they felt the tension of structuring their time around less flexible weekly timelines provided through the unit materials.

There existed, then, tension between two different types of lived time: forced synchronicity of the unit and asynchronicity needed to fit study into personal routines. It provided an interesting dilemma for students. They needed to modify their time and associated routines to match the synchronous weekly routine while acting within the asynchronous flexibility of negotiating work, study, family and social responsibilities. Put simply, in many cases the units were designed for weekly routines, but undertaken online in the context of many differing lived times. The various conflicts of lived time impacted student engagement. Perceived conflicts between lived times and external intrusions into them, led to students' sense of loss of control and increased alienation and disengagement.

5.3.2 Lived space

Lived (study) space for the distance online student took many forms. Whether work, home or elsewhere, each one impacted engagement in particular ways. "Home is where we can *be* what *we are*" (van Manen, 1990, p. 102, his emphasis). For all participants, home provided at least one space for study. The phenomenon of studying online requires certain features of its space. Traditionally, space for studying is ascribed characteristics such as quiet and shielded. Participant students searched out and developed spaces at home to maximise their engagement with study.

Tricia and Mary both studied at home. Whilst Tricia used her laptop and other study materials in her kitchen while her husband was at work, Mary had a number of different spaces around her home which she used: for example in her home office or on the lounge suite. For Tricia, the laptop on the kitchen table emphasised distance and the online-ness of her learning – the separation of her learning space there at the kitchen table from the far off university. Her learning was delivered to her kitchen in her remote home. In her kitchen there were no obvious symbols of the university. No cultural artefacts to link her to the other academic world or a learning community. Tricia's university was the hardware on the kitchen table, as she explained: *"I see myself as an online student not a University student 'cause I'm not at University – I'm at my computer in my kitchen"*. The space did not support her engagement, but rather emphasised her alienation.

Mary had a spare bedroom which she had fitted out with her laptop as an office/study – in van Manen's terms a mathematical space. But Mary viewed her laptop as a gateway space through which she passed out of her home into her university life. Mary defined her computer as a link to the university:

It's part, the whole thing. It's not just this little window into the world. It's like you're actually right/well that's what I find. I'm here at home, but I'm at uni through there [pointed to laptop]. The same in many ways that someone would be – face-to-face.

She perceived her computer not as a distancing device, but as a conduit, part of her that at the time of study made her part of the university. Her study space became peripatetic, not a sedentary space, but one which she carried around with her – a more dynamic space, symbolically rather than physically demarcated as she described: *"My kids know if I've got that lanyard round me, DON'T COME NEAR ME²². I'm busy [studying]"*.

There was a blurring between lived time and lived space. Time shifting offered options to study when it suits: times when participants felt at their brightest or most alert; or perhaps sharing

²² Mary's emphasis.

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times on multiple tasks; or times when other demands are not so pressing²³. Shifting time allowed participants to move into new spaces: spaces where their lives as students were lived. Ida converted her car into a study while she waited for her children: *I can be sitting in the car with a text book.*

The interrelationship of time and space was also evidenced by Rhonda's experience of studying in a hospital which (re)defined her study space over a particular time:

I have a computer, I access on my phone, I have an iPod, so I'm not really anywhere where I can't get access to things. Um and I find that is so beneficial. Like I've just been in Sydney for 10 days with my husband in hospital over there and I can sit in the hospital room and get onto MyLO.

Rhonda's lived space was not just physical, but also constructed in terms of her different activities and where her mind was at that moment. Space which most people would see as medical was transformed, in her perception, into educational space: re-configured to facilitate her need for feeling connected. For participant students lived space took its meaning from the activities being undertaken rather than the space defining the activities.

Study spaces changed²⁴ and were defined by what happened there; for example it was the connectedness to content, tutors and peers and the study routines that provided a sense of engagement. The study space could be a university in a box or a conduit to a new world. Whatever or wherever it was, the study space supported their identity as a student. Jane explained that she had a specific (mathematical) space: *"Um, I do. I've got my study desk over there and I've set up and I do feel like a student, I do a lot of reading, I do a lot of highlighting, um trying to fit study in between kids"*. Bill indicated that his space for studying, facilitated by recorded lectures, separated him from the daily distractions physically and psychologically:

Um, generally, [...] I lock myself in the study with a coffee or a glass of wine or whatever it may be at the time, depending on what the lecture is [laugh] and usually have a notepad next to me and listen away.

²³ I have found no research on the effectiveness of listening to podcasts of lecturers while ironing, although I have spoken with at least two students who have done it.

²⁴ see Kaufman-Scarborough (2006) for a discussion of temporary spaces.

As was the case for Mary, Indigo did not have a physically defined space; her comments indicated that the pragmatic needs of her family dictated that she used wherever she could find: *"No, that's a problem 'cause we've got so many kids here. They're using up all the room. [laugh]"*. Participants created a study space at home where they could go to be a student, but they were not constrained to using these constructed spaces. Out of pragmatism, participants converted the spaces in which they found themselves at any particular time into their study spaces.

Spaces used by participants where they felt like students included kitchens, dining rooms, bedrooms, work offices and cars. They felt *freer*, perhaps because these spaces did not have attached to them the power relationships and etiquettes which were embedded into lecture theatres, seminar rooms and libraries. What turned their home office or dining room table into a study space? It was where they felt engaged with their study.

There were paradoxes of space for participants: at the one moment their study space isolated them from those physically around them, because each space was unique, sometimes even to that moment. However, at the same time their study space connected to the other spaces, less familiar than the physical spaces surrounding them. These were spaces they shared with their tutors and peers. They were with their families, but separate from them; they were separate from peers and tutors, but with them. Participants were encouraged to feel part of a long standing and sophisticated culture with an incredible array of cultural artefacts that are universities, but were left alone to develop their own, very personalised spaces and identity as students.

5.3.3 Lived body

Participants expressed a preference for meeting with others to be in a physical landscape. The lack of a physical presence made engagement more difficult for many participants and they needed to develop mechanisms to overcome disembodiment and engage with others.

The lived body of distance online students existed in two landscapes - the digital in which they studied and the physical in which they performed many roles and had many identities and images. These landscapes are operationally distinct; each with its own parameters and rules. As they could

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occur simultaneously, distance online students could be engaged in two worlds and be bodily different in each. They could be meeting someone online, on a discussion board, displaying their online body (image) as a good student, while sitting in their pyjamas as a parent while their children are readied for bed.

Participants related feeling engaged to feeling like a student (identity), to portraying themselves as a student and 'looking' like a student (image). When asked if she saw herself as a student, Wanda explained: *Um, in that I'm studying, yeah. It's probably more serious to me, than it is to them [her children]- which is the way it should be.*

To Wanda, students, specifically her children, are young and less *serious*. These are the types of bodies which she perceives she would usually meet in the world of higher education; *the way it should be*. Engaging corporeally with others was difficult when the body was hidden and the image which was held of a student was not one which matched who they were.

When asked what in general students were like, and what they did, students whose lifeworlds contain little or no previous university experience and in some cases little and/or negative school experience, relied on second-hand information (Thomas, 2002). This information may have come from others they knew to be students or media such as books, television programs, films and news, as Ida said:

Well I don't know what they do. I probably don't want to know what they do. [laugh] I think some enjoy going to uni just for 'that' especially if their parents are paying for the uni and they're not. I'm sure they just go for the parties. [laugh] That's all I hear with the kids at work. I've got a party tonight. I've got a party tonight. [laugh] and I know they're at uni. [laugh]

The identification, as Ida has done, of university as a social and cultural experience as well as a place of learning brings with it many misconceptions; this was particularly so for those who came from families with little or no experience in higher education. Participants' geographical distance from campus was matched by their social and cultural remoteness, as Geraldine indicated when asked what she thought study would be like:

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It just wasn't something that ever entered your/um well my mind. Probably because nobody else in the family had ever gone to university. It was just something that was up there and I was down here, you know. So, it's thinking that you get from a lot of people, you talk to them and you say that you're doing university and they say "Wow, how can you do that? You must be really brainy."

The participants painted a picture of misunderstanding and ambivalence in regard to how they saw themselves bodily in the world of online study, and how this impacted negatively on their engagement. Through the feeling of a bodily presence, there was the possibility of the greater revelation of some things (a more precise understanding of image) which enabled deeper relationships (reciprocity and connectedness) to develop and to be exploited later. When this feeling of bodily presence was diminished or confused, engagement suffered.

Residential schools, when they had been held provided corporeal opportunities for students, which Wanda experienced with positive outcomes, as she explained:

At first it was just a matter of you know, names on a board. What was the best, best thing was the residential summer school. ... and so, we met at the airport down here and looked suspiciously at each other and got down to Tassie, moved in. Cracked the first bottle of wine and after that it was like we had known each other for ever.

A: *Has that continued?*

Wanda: *Yes, all the way through.*

A: *What about other students that you may not have had that face to face ...*

Wanda: *They suffer. You can tell the way they talk about things on the [discussion] board, they don't have that little core group that they know they can fall back on that's like family; in a way. 'Cause you have met them face to face.*

She reinforced her feeling that without the initial bodily experience subsequent online relationships suffered.

The issues of corporeality impacted tutors too. The problems caused by the perceived paucity of the corporeal experience were a constant throughout the interviews with tutors as well. A lack of a bodily presence of those online caused complications, as tutor Albert's online experience exemplified:

I've got a young lady in Mt Isa²⁵, who is having problems with her laptop computer and she wanted me to help her out: which is fine. That's what I regard myself as being here for. But it was only in the last stages of our conversation when I was trying to arrange an appointment for her to come and visit me in my office that I then found out that she was in Mt Isa and that it wasn't going to work!

[laugh] *So, you know, you can have these conversations and that's fine and it's perhaps at the last minute that you discover that you're not going to be able to actually meet physically.*

Without corporeal experience, Albert's view of the student was somewhat traditional - that she was a *young lady*; and that this young person would be available on-campus to drop in and *visit*. To establish some corporeal understanding Albert needed to view her photo online or perhaps look up her student records to know if indeed she was young and local. When this student was not met bodily, there was an opportunity for Albert to see her in his physical default perception.

Indeed, Albert's *young lady* from Mt Isa may have been more mature than she sounded on the telephone or appeared in her email to him. Albert's response to her was misaimed at the point of connecting and the possibility of positive reciprocity from her could have been lost. Disembodiment in this case initially made it difficult for students and tutors to develop relationships. In distance online study there is no *body* to see; no body to know, evaluate and to which to respond.

Away from their traditional habitat - the physical university campus – participant students had few distinguishing marks. To those around them, they still looked like spouses, parents, friends and colleagues. They did not engage with them as students. In the seemingly bodiless digital landscape, distance online students struggled to develop the bodies with which to support their engagement with others online.

²⁵ Mt Isa was not the real town mentioned by Albert.

5.3.4 Lived other

There are others who inhabit the participants' lifeworlds. They too, influenced participants' engagement experience. On the one hand participants lived in a face-to-face world of family, friends and work: on the other, the online world with peers, tutors and the university. This was not to confect a dichotomy as lived relations (van Manen, 1990) exist across both environments within the participants' lifeworlds, however such an arrangement reflected the participants' own experience. They found themselves in both worlds, if not at the same time then constantly slipping between them as foregrounded stimuli change and impact. Consider what an important skill apparently seamlessly transitioning between lived human relations in two worlds becomes to those who develop it.

Student engagement was impacted by changes in these relations. To maximise engagement they needed to manage the other people involved. Participants provided stories of the way in which changes in relations were pragmatically managed by them and their significant others. Implicit and explicit 'deals' were made to reduce or remove tensions in particular relations. Whilst these deals were outside of the online unit, their success was pivotal to the participants' study engagement and success.

Mary was conscious of her husband's views regarding her studies and was able to distance herself from them in her mind by linking them to his socio-cultural background as this discussion about her husband's attitude indicated:

Mary: *He hates it. [laugh]*

A: *Any reasons in particular?*

Mary: *Um, well he's not um/ None of his family have ever gone to uni/ I don't think any of his family have ever actually finished/ they've come from England anyway so it's a different schooling system, um, never went on and did their SATs or whatever they call them - the equivalent of year eleven and twelve. Um, none of them have ever gone on and done that. Um, so he just doesn't [pause] / You're born to work, basically is his assumption about life.*

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The pressures of her relations regarding her marriage were in tension with the new relations she was building as a student.

It spoke to the strength of Mary's engagement with her studies that she was able to transcend such a pressured environment. She went on to underline her continuing commitment to her studies and how she was looking forward to the final results. Her commitment was also emphasised by her actions in developing a proposal for an Honours year.

Participants were all prepared to weather pressures from existing relations, and balance them with the developing relations of student life. To a large extent at some time, family and social relations took a back seat to study. Wanda and Jane even used the word *selfish* regarding their need to manage their family relations and engage with their study; but they rationalised it for themselves by pointing out that their success was also good for the family socially and financially, at the very least.

Relationships which existed before study began needed to change to accommodate personal changes arising from new found activities and changing perceptions of their identities and other relations. As Jane described, the changes might have been as insignificant as reorganising home duties:

*... or my husband might even do his ironing. **His** ironing, not mine 'cause they're **his** work shirts.*

"I've run out of shirts so I've ironed them" he'll say. It's like "Thank you honey". With study I just make sure that my family's taken care of, meals are done. We have a roster for what meals are being cooked and so my husband does the food shopping so I have to make sure that what I get him to shop for is what I am putting in my meals, so it's just a matter of being organised. My husband bought me a slow cooker²⁶ so around assignment time I can just put something in the slow cooker and dinner's ready and I don't have to worry about cutting anything up at four o'clock when the kids are going manic.

Family meals also played a part in relations and their management, as Indigo explained:

²⁶ At this point, I am not advocating that slow cookers be considered a type of educational technology in spite of the fact that they clearly impact on student engagement.

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I'd say that my husband's annoyed. Yeah, he's been very annoyed lately. Which is one of the reasons I'm only doing one unit and you know, I know he's got no right to feel it really in one way, but in another way it's been a big change for him because I am / my head is in a computer. You know, I used to cook delicious fabulous meals all the time and now it's just the quick, chilli con carne. [laugh] "Not that again" kind of thing. The kids haven't complained.

However, there were many roles which these students needed to fulfil. Besides having children to ferry around after school, Ida identified other roles: *Outside of uni, I actually enjoy where I work. It's different to what I'd thought it would be. [...] um outside of my work it's, well yeah, family and farm all that sort of thing, keeping it all together. Keeping it all together brought with it a blurring of the roles. At any one time a participant might be fulfilling roles other than that of student, so feelings of engagement were contextualised.*

Geraldine's situation mirrored that of other women participants, but she used her new environment to accommodate her new life. As she explained, due to her engagement with study, there has been a role reversal between her husband and herself:

Broadly, it's changed my and my husband's roles I guess - that has definitely changed because basically before I started studying I did inside and he was outside. He was doing the gardening and looking after the chooks and the veggie garden and all that. Now if I need a break and want to move around and that, I'll go out and do some of the outside things. So, we've basically swapped, but not totally. I still do some of the housework, yeah. I use mowing the lawn as getting out and doing some exercise. Getting outside and everything.

In what was a simple and rational deal, these agreed role changes helped Geraldine manage her transition to study. Additionally as a result of her study, she had become the family 'bread-winner'. Particularly at over fifty years old, these were significant relationship changes, and their successful transition was pivotal to the success of her study program. Geraldine felt that the deal for her to become the breadwinner was the main reason for the changes. For her family, potential tensions in relationships had been circumvented in a very pragmatic way by simple changes.

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Mary's relations with her children also had an impact. When asked about her children's responses to her study Mary said: *My kids are at a point now that they hate it. They hate it.* When asked why, she replied: *Just the time, the time factor. I was sitting here the other night and they were saying to me, just quit mum, just quit.* Jane spoke of similar concerns about her relations with her children. The impact of engaging as a student on her feelings about her parental responsibilities weighed on her mind, as she described: *Um, I do. I've got my study desk over there [...] um I'm trying to fit study in between kids: especially in school holidays, it's very difficult, but yeah, I feel I sometimes especially when assignments are due, that I am just bogged down and the house suffers a lot [laugh] the kids suffer.*

Bill would: *generally, wait until my kids have gone to sleep* before he could listen to a lecture. He was conscious of his parental responsibilities and the importance of *doing his share of parenting*, as his wife was the wage earner.

Geraldine was also being rewarded by her granddaughter's positive response to incorporating her into her *study* activities. As she explained, by managing her study program and including her granddaughter, she was able to blur the separation of family and study worlds:

Yes. I think so. She's enjoyed and I've enjoyed this semester's study more, because when she comes to stay on the weekend, which is most weekends, I'll save the art activity or the music activity, and we'll have fun doing that while she's there. Whereas, last semester because I did four units, I was always studying when she was there and she didn't like it. She didn't want to/ she used to say in the end that I don't wanna go to Nan's, she's always studying. But this semester it's oh, I wanna go to Nan and help her with her fun. So, you know, so it's not a bad thing now: it's become fun.

Geraldine had briefly managed to merge her study and family worlds. At that moment, in that place, Geraldine the grandmother, Geraldine the student and Geraldine the student teacher became one and satisfactory outcomes were achieved for all.

Relations with friends outside of study also had a role to play. Mary acknowledged that she had lost friends as a result of her studying, but quickly noted that *good friends* still kept in contact,

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signalling that good friends understood her engagement with her study to attain her goal, and accepted changes in her, and changes in the relationship. In this case it was not so much that these relations impacted her engagement, but rather her increased engagement impacted the relations. She explained that those who could not understand her engagement were not good friends and it was their lack of support that would end their relationship:

With studying there's a lot of contact um that I've lost with other people. Um, but I also figure/ There are some that have completely dropped off and I'll probably never have anything to do with them again. Doesn't worry me to be honest. Um, there are other people, really good close friends who, while they fully don't understand what I'm doing and why I'm doing it, they're quite happy, you know, if we only have that phone call every three months, then that's great and they appreciate it, I appreciate it, because that's the network, you know that close relationship you have so that's OK.

Engagement with study also brought about change in professional relations and was a potent motivator when impacting on existing work (professional) relationships. As Bill was already working in a school environment, he was sensitive to these changes:

I went up to another school, and was in grade preps, so I was Mr. Shaw then, I wasn't Bill, and um the teacher there said to me that I was obviously a great classroom assistant, but I needed to take the step from being an assistant to being a leader. And she said that quite early in the placement and er, and then she was quite happy in the end that I'd made that step and really took it on and then to come back to being Integration Aid and to being the assistant was a difficult transition.

Bill noticed the difference in his roles and this provided a motivation for him to resign from work to study full-time, so that he could finish quickly and move on to his new profession. There were financial and family considerations too, but the recognition of the possibility of change appealed to him.

Engaging with study activated complex changes in the way in which participants interacted with the others in their world.

5.3.5 Reflecting on students' lived experiences

Understanding student engagement is a complex and multi-faceted process which can be analysed through a range of available frameworks. To date, most of these frameworks have been aimed at improving student engagement though identifying, for example, factors (Khu, 2001; Coates & Hillman, 2008), or perspectives (Mann, 2001) of engagement, critical for improving student outcomes.

In a sense, this investigation was the obverse of the engagement coin. It re-framed the phenomenon of student engagement to focus on what occurred from a student perspective, rather than how to use engagement to improve outcomes. Whilst issues relating to engagement raised by participants resonated with aspects of positive teaching and learning that are found in the frameworks mentioned above, student experiences and perceptions of their engagement were more personal.

Reflecting on students' lived experiences began to throw some light on the way in which students understood their experiences of engagement. However, as the interviews progressed, the participants unpacked their understandings and provide examples, stories and anecdotes of what they felt it meant to be engaged with their study, content, peers, tutors and the university. Consistencies in these revelations led me to look for themes relating to engagement which might be shared by the participants.

5.4 Thematic analysis

In trying to develop a deeper understanding of engagement and to make sense of students' experiences, I re-engaged with the data to listen for themes which recurred in the interviews.

5.4.1 Listening for themes

One of the issues associated with being distance online students was that there was no (or comparatively very little) time spent on campus *being a student* - that is, acting out the roles which

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often are associated with a student. Therefore, those participants who were early school leavers were unsure of the roles which they were expected to play. As Geraldine pointed out: *Well, a student is someone who goes to school. So, yeah, I don't think of myself as a student. I'm someone who studies.* Tricia also understood her lack of student experience. *I've never really studied on campus, so how would I know what it's like to be a student.*

Indigo took a similar position to Geraldine, acknowledging that she didn't know what it felt like to be a university student. Instead she focussed on the learning process of which she was a part. *Well I don't know what a university student feels like though. Um, I just feel like me: learning something else.* Pragmatically, participants were studying to get a professional teaching qualification, so naming their feelings about studying was not a priority, or as in Rita's situation, the words are not found in their lifeworlds.

Being engaged with study is simultaneously a pedagogic and social phenomenon (Mann, 2005). Students also found it difficult to differentiate factors which contribute to their sense of engagement with their study as opposed to engaging with other roles and tasks in life. Tricia's description of her sense of disengagement carried the feeling of alienation (Mann 2001, 2005). Her need for connectedness was not merely an expression of a technological process: although arguably technology facilitates or impedes a feeling of connectedness (Feenberg, 2002). However, Tricia also identified some other elements of connectedness that went deeper than her ability to interact with others (Friesen & Kuskis, 2012). For Tricia, the lack of meaningful conversation mitigated feelings of connectedness. It played against the flow of her feelings and the timeliness of responses. For her, being connected was not just two-way communication or collaboration: *Maybe, maybe the ability to be engaged is the ability to need something and have that need met - um, when you need it met. Maybe 'cause I feel like [laugh] I need something... it's days before my need is met, if at all. I feel like I am lucky to receive any communication or correspondence. That's the exception not the rule - which makes me feel disengaged.*

She also anticipated meaningful responses from others to her communications. Where it happened, the reciprocation of others drew her closer to them. This was more than interaction and

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involvement through a discussion board thread. It was a way of asserting herself as an individual; taking control of her identity within the unit (Perriton & Reedy, 2002) and the context of her relations with others. In this she focussed on her engagement with the units of study, her peers and tutor, not the Faculty of Education nor the university when she said: *I am relating this specifically to my own learning because I can't comprehend what it means to engage with the university. I don't even know what university looks like or where it is. I've never seen it and I probably never will, so that doesn't factor into my thoughts – it's completely irrelevant.*

Throughout the interviews Tricia differentiated between her lack of engagement with the university and her relations within her student life: that is, the interactions with peers and tutors. In the second interview she described how she engaged differently with some tutors and peers.

The tutorial task has a lot to do with how engaged you are. Is it good teaching? Are you viewing good teaching? Some are boring; their questions aren't thought provoking. The good tutors are good teachers. And the good teachers ask good questions. They get you interested. And I've been surprised, a couple of subjects 'I've thought, Oh God, I don't want to do that subject. It's going to be awful.' And they've been really, really interesting. ... And then in another subject that I knew something about, I thought that this should be interesting, but the tutor didn't engage with us and it was terrible.

Engagement for Tricia was not merely related to the academic challenge, but the manner in which it was presented and how the tutor reciprocated. She felt connected with the unit materials, but it was the reciprocity of peers and tutors that she needed, to establish who she was (in both a corporeal and relational sense) within the group. Tricia anticipated the flow (of ideas and sentiments) between herself and others to meet her need to develop her identity as a student and her motivation to continue to study: *Just imagine if I walked into class every day and I never made eye contact with my tutor and they never spoke to me. And yet I participated in all the activities and I completed the weekly tasks and I contributed to all the discussions, but I never once made eye contact or had a conversation. That is what it is like*

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to be online. I'm in the room and no one can see me. I'm in the tutorial and no one can hear me. I'm an invisible student.

It is an oversimplification to classify this aspect of engagement as improving communication. Such 'catch-all' terms mask another aspect of engagement for Tricia - its dynamic and transactional nature – its reciprocity. Engagement, as she understood it, had at its core an implicit agreement between her tutors, her peers and herself to relevant, timely, two-way interactions. In Tricia's case timeliness was also relevant to engagement. Many times throughout the interviews she lamented the slowness of tutors' responses.

OK, I'll post on Monday. On Thursday the tutor logs on and says: "Those were some great ideas Tricia, but how would you extend them a bit further." So I read that on Thursday and I reply and then a week later they'll say: "hum". [laugh] It's like it's two weeks later now and we're having a conversation in week four and I can't even remember what it was about. ... A three sentence conversation over two weeks?

The importance of the timeliness of response varied between students and depended on the context of the interaction. An analysis of the data indicated that timeliness was not an essential part of reciprocity for everyone and demonstrated the difference in the way in which temporality is perceived by the participants.

The sense of corporeal connectedness which Jane desired was at least in part provided through the development of her local group.

Um, I found being distance it's very hard because all you can see is names and you don't know what they're like and um we, like for our first semester, it was just purely online - didn't have any connection. During my second semester there's actually a few people who live nearby, who have actually got a study group going and it's a lot easier because we, even though some of us are doing different subjects, just being able to bounce ideas off each other, um, is very, very helpful. [...] Ooh I can put a face to a name, that we've seen, and we went out for a drink afterwards and that just built the bond. [...]

I know a lot of the younger ones in our group are struggling just because they don't get that, um, engagement, that connection.

Seeing a face, preferably in person, but even a photo online was important to be able to interact with others, *build a bond* and feel connected. Building bonds with other students (or her image of other students which she developed from the available clues) enabled her to develop a feeling of connectedness which in turn developed a feeling of engagement with them and subsequently her sense of being a student with other students (identity). She looked to the “bodily presence [of her peers] to reveal something” (van Manen, 1990, p. 103). The bond, the feeling of intimacy, which arose from the informal face-to-face contact, underpinned connectedness for her. Her study group meetings were not primarily about content or about distributing the workload – as she pointed out; people in the group were not necessarily enrolled in the same units. They were about establishing and maintaining her sense of identity as a student and the subsequent connectedness through being able to know *who it is and a little bit about their circumstances*. The face-to-face meetings were about seeing her peers in their naturalness (van Manen, 1990).

Jane also viewed engagement in a deeper process sense. ... *I'm posting when I need to and I'm also reading other people's posts. So I am engaging a lot with my course and learning and gaining knowledge from that. With my peers, I don't engage [with all of them] 'cause there's something like 200 students in each of the online courses, I think I have a few selected ones, and especially my study group that I engage with more, but I read other people's comments and comment back if I've connected with it or found something good about what they've said or if it's a different perspective [from the way] I've seen it, so I make that engagement there. It's hard because with MyLO some of the discussion, especially around assignment time, is just silly things like “How do I reference this?” or “What do I do here?”.*

Because she could not engage with every student Jane needed to make pragmatic decisions. She performed those activities which kept her in touch with particular others, and was involved with the unit, the tutor and selected peers in that unit. She was a good citizen, responding to the tutors and selected peers in a way which she controlled.

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Although presenting as a very motivated and self-contained student, Rhonda needed timely, personal responses from peers and tutors to feel engaged. There was a dynamic relationship which was continually negotiated, nourished or starved by the responses of peers, the institution and particularly the tutors.

The personally difficult time which Rhonda had recently experienced focussed her view of engagement on relations with others. It also highlighted the way in which she was conscious of the tension between her identity as a conscientious student and the image others (her tutor) might have of her – as someone trying to manipulate tutors so as to gain an extension.

... I found that.[...]... they were relatively supportive and helpful and understanding and took me as - on [the] face value of my emails; whereas some other lecturers who I haven't had as much interaction in the learning environment, when I then emailed them about my struggles, they were quick to assume either it was an excuse to get an extension: it was a very coldly written email [from the tutor].

Rhonda provided a further insight into engagement - image. She focused on controlling how she appeared to others online (her image) and conversely, and more importantly in terms of feeling connected, how she developed a view of those others through the manner in which they presented online (their image) in order not to waste time: *Um, very early on in semester one in breaking into the tute groups that are thirty odd in each tute I think, um the style of people's writing um and how, I guess what it sort of comes down to is this is how we get to know each other, and the information that people choose to share to introduce themselves and give background; and I've always been one to very quickly get sense of people, and within the first week or two I was able to look at posts and I got to say, right see people's names pop up and roll my eyes: or go, I'm going to read this but I know it's gonna annoy me.*

When the usual corporeal clues were unavailable, students worked to find substitute indicators. Rhonda relied on discussion board writing styles to evaluate the images of the others in her unit. These were not people with whom she intended to develop long term relationships. Pragmatically, they were people whom she judged would provide her with study support. These

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summary judgements highlighted the limited information available. Later in the interview it became evident that she had developed a separate group for personal support in a difficult situation. The strategic development of relationships was not unique to distance online students. However, the different set of corporeal clues and cues which are available to use demanded a different set of skills to lead to success.

A common comment of the participant students was that it was difficult to perceive an image or understanding of other students online. In a corporeal sense, in the absence of a familiar landscape within which to meet another, students turned to other clues. As Rhonda exemplified, with text the major communication tool, it was the manner in which text was used by the others that was influential in making judgements about them. These judgements were pivotal in deciding whether engagement occurred and if it did, the form it took.

Image, both presented and perceived were central to engagement and an understanding of it. Jane articulated concerns regarding image control and perception through her need to see a face, and conversely have her face seen by others.

Rhonda also articulated the importance of reciprocity in engagement in relation to her various interactions with tutors. The efforts of tutors to respond, as detected by students, were perceived favourably: *I'm certainly more engaged by the lecturers that do make that, that extra effort and you see lecturers who come in, who you know have worked all day with face to face students who've uploaded lectures and assignments onto MyLO for their distance students...*

In this observation Rhonda foregrounded two examples of the temporality of engagement. When it happened, she recognised the dislocation of the lived time of the tutors: *who then go back to work at seven or eight or nine in the evening to then engage with their students who are studying online to find times to work around us*, and the fact that distance online students pressured tutors to work hours impinging on the tutor's family and social time. In Rhonda's mind, the corollary (reciprocation) of this was that tutors need to understand and recognise subjective time of the student: *understanding that we do require*

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that flexibility, those who are working or have young children. Or in Tricia's words: If they don't care about me: I don't care about them.

Geraldine quite succinctly identified one of the paradoxes to which many other student participants alluded: that is, the high quantity (frequency) of contact versus the poor quality (appropriateness) of contact. The (broader) university tried to improve student engagement through helping students feel part of the university community by providing many of the general circulation emails – thus exposing them to the cultural richness of university campus life. In fact, this activity served only to increase her feeling of her transactional distance (Moore, 1993) from the campus and reduce her sense of engagement. The large number of broadcast emails from the university led Geraldine to point out: *... I'm sort of removed. You know, ... I do get a lot of information, which is great, you get all the emails about what's on here on certain days and everything. But because you're so far away and money and time of course, you don't always get to come here, you know I'd love to come to some of the things that are on, but it's just not [possible]... I get quite frustrated.*

Tricia agreed that information dispersed in such an unfiltered manner caused her to question her engagement with the university: *I'm sick of getting emails inviting me to stuff that I can't go to. [laugh] At least two a week. ... I wish that they'd delete my name off it sometimes. ... It makes me feel excluded. All this great stuff that other people can participate in - I'd rather not know about it.*

The opportunity to socially engage with the institution, a positive factor in the AUSSE, was impractical from the students' points of view. Being removed from the opportunity of being a 'real' student on-campus - participating in student activities, be they academic or social, accentuated Geraldine's difficulty identifying as a student: *Um, I suppose it's because you're not actually going to a classroom and sitting in front of a teacher. Not having a teacher right there with you. So you don't really feel like a student. And because you are just studying at home.*

If Tricia and Geraldine provided examples of the problematic nature of engagement with the university, then Mary was an example of someone who embraced her identity as a student and engaged with the university, or at least with the idea of being part of a university: *I mean I'm proud to*

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have the sticker on the back of my car that says, I go to uni, and that I go to University. I mean I'm miles away, I can never get there. Um, but you become interested in what's actually happening. It's not just this little window into the world. It's like you're actually right [there]... well that's what I find. I'm here at home, but I'm at uni through there (points to laptop). The same in many ways that someone would be, face-to-face.

The depth of development of Mary's identity as a University student was compelling. In contrast to Geraldine and Tricia, Mary's experience was not one of isolation. She developed a University student identity and presented an image of a student to the point that her children saw her as a University student: *Just the other day we were driving and my son saw a University ad on a bus. He said, mum, look there's your school.*

To complete her identity as a student Mary had a network of peers.

We've managed to create our own networks along the way. Um, we Skype continuously. Skype always runs in the background from the time you get up in the morning to the time you go to bed at night; Skype's in the background. Um, I've never ever found a time where I've actually been alone. Maybe for the first six weeks, and one of the girls at uni got me onto Skype and from that point it's just/ the whole network has just grown. Um, yeah, I never ever felt that I was studying alone.

For Mary, Skype provided a space where she could be a student, no matter what else happened during the day. A personal space encapsulating the familiarity of her connectedness with a select group of peers and changing the perspective of time to one defined by those in that world. This was not the formal world created in MyLO where deadlines, resources and formal discussions were the norm. It was the other, the space of comforting and sharing which provided renewal and spirit to live the complex life of a distance online student. Groups such as this emphasised how much student life occurred outside MyLO.

Besides emphasising connectedness (with the content), Bill also foregrounded pragmatism. Pragmatism for student participants had many facets. It might be that one studied when one could (Mary studied before the children woke in the morning); one studied where one could (Ida studied in

her car while waiting for her children at sport); one used whatever resources were available at the time (Mary printed out readings for use on the train, and read off-screen of an evening at home). Or it may be as Bill described: wanting everything he was learning to relate to his aim of being a teacher: such relevance giving him a double return on his investment of time and effort in his studies through course results and improved professional practice. ... *I've found over the duration of my studies, subjects where I've been unable to see the link between what I'm learning and perhaps the profession as a teacher, I've been, I guess, not as engaged therefore not as motivated and struggled to commit myself to the time frame that I needed to use.*

Bill was working as an Integration Aide. In that role he provided an insight into why distance students scored higher on the work integrated learning score of the AUSSE than on-campus students (Kahu, et al., 2013). As he was already working in a school environment, his judgements of relevance to professional development and day to day practice were more attuned than someone not working in a school environment. In a busy life, where study did not always have top priority, such overt pragmatism was a hallmark of being engaged. When asked about relative interest in topics he continued: *Well some would be personal interest, but arh, others would be I guess perceived necessity. You know, if you can see how something is going to benefit you in your practice as a teacher and being part of the in-service working in the school, you can see; I guess you can physically see how behaviour management or something along those lines, or literacy or um, mathematics pedagogies and that sort of thing are all ... you can see how they work. You can see in practice ...*

The rewards of achieving satisfaction in outcomes were bound to the learning which he was undertaking. This was one of the positives for mature-age distance students – the link between study and work. However, the issue of connectedness was still evident in Bill's experience.

Studying via distance I think it's probably a lonely world. [laugh] Um, when I first started here at the school that I'm at, there was another Integration Aide who was studying the same degree, um, he's since graduated, but arh, that was, I preferred that. It was good to have somebody at least to sound off a little bit um, it does become, yeah, isolated. Um, I don't engage very well with

online communication. I tend to, if I need to contact a lecturer or whatever about university issues, I'm more likely to send an email asking when I can phone [laugh] I just prefer that verbal, or visual communication. So, it is a difficult way to study, but for me the only way I could have done it, having a young family and a mortgage, it would have been impossible otherwise.

This was a common story for participant students. Pragmatically, distance online was the only way they could achieve their objective of becoming a teacher. The tension developed between their ambition and the way of achieving it. The lack of corporeal experience was a continual issue, but there was no other option, so other strategies were employed to minimise the perceived deficit. Pragmatism in study involved a process of assessing options, evaluating relative risks and rewards and taking actions which provided the best return.

Wanda also took a similarly pragmatic approach: *Oh, it's been, every bit of them has been valuable. I mean not one hundred percent of every/you cherry pick what works and what you need at the time. But, um, yeah, I've learned so much that I can utilise and I feel that it's definitely been beneficial.*

Unlike a face-to-face tutorial, a pragmatic approach (or *cherry picking* in Wanda's terms), allowed these distance online student to efficiently negotiate the vast content and complex processes and relations with which they are confronted and choose how and when to participate for greatest rewards.

Bill's level of involvement had changed during his enrolment. *I started off; well I started off I guess with lofty ideals and then, arh, you know, went to the thinking, you know, that Ps get degrees [laugh] and all the rest of it. And perhaps now I'm sort of thinking again that I, you know, that I enjoy getting good marks and the subjects I've got left to do, I think more about that, you know, perhaps there is some benefit in getting higher marks. To know not that I'm just going through the motions, that I've studied it and perhaps got a better understanding of it.*

These themes of connectedness, reciprocity, involvement and pragmatism are also evident in Indigo's interview. Interaction, response and on-going contact dominated her understanding of engagement. When asked if she needed to be engaged to continue her course, she said: *Yes. I need the*

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online feedback that I get. I've found one of the units that I've completed, the feedback I received from that tutor was excellent because I knew if I was on the wrong track. And when the feedback was positive I knew that that was more of what I needed to look into and research. That type of engagement led me other resources which have made it easy for me to identify exactly what it is I do want to do. The feedback is important. Some of the structure of the lessons is difficult to define though online. Like I can often go off into tangents that are not relevant.

Indigo explicitly recognised the importance of involvement (the academic interaction with tutor and peers) as a part of her engagement. She used it to maintain focus, to increase the efficiency and effectiveness of her study processes. These benefits were important in a time poor environment.

When I asked Mary about the way she saw a relationship between engagement, motivation and commitment (three terms which had arisen in previous participant interviews) she linked the concepts of engagement and routine most immediately and directly of all participants.

Um, and then I think that once you get into that routine, and you become engaged you do kind of get drawn in; and at the end of the semester it's just like, oh my God what am I gonna do now?

And you're continually going back to MyLO to check, because you just have to because it's part of your whole/ that's what you do every day.

For her, being efficient and effective was based on her gradually increased involvement in her study; her ability to connect and the routine which she established in interacting with her online units. Routine was at least at three levels. The macro level described above was a routine across the year. The seasons of semester study and then between-semester breaks provided a rhythm for her. The absence of her semester routine was noticed and felt.

I think it was a gradual thing, but I know at the end of the semester, I don't cope [laugh]. While it's wonderful to know that that last assignment's been handed in but next week it'll be: 'I'm lost'.

It's like my mobile phone's been taken away from me. So you do engage in it and even if you don't get on the discussion boards to have that, you know, that Facebook type chat, you know the

general discussion type stuff just constantly being in there, I mean it's how you connect. It is, it's huge, it's a huge connection.

Other participants referred to routine at more micro levels. The weekly or daily routine of checking discussion boards, working on readings, undertaking assignments and interacting with peers.

As can be seen from the sample of student voices above, thought, perceptions and feelings recurred through the transcripts. The next stage was to bring them together to provide a deeper sense of students' experiences.

5.5 Emergent themes of engagement

During the analysis stage, a consensus developed around a number of issues or themes relating to understanding student engagement. These themes developed as a response to the data rather than a restructuring of it.

The themes are: connectedness, reciprocity, pragmatism, involvement, routine, online identity, online image. Themes were not factors, nor elements nor characteristics which define engagement. In fact, they cut across a classification of engagement. For example, connectedness is not only experienced as part of the social element of engagement. Participants indicate that they also are connected with the content and their future profession. Reciprocity and pragmatism can relate as much to academic and intellectual elements as to the personal. Themes are aggregations of perceptions rather than a framework. They can be used to help understand how the elements or factors or characteristics of frameworks impact student engagement.

The development of these themes represented what I heard students say they felt was important to them. In some cases specific theme words were used by the students. This is particularly so for wanting to feel connected, feel a connection or feel involved, or regarding their online image. In other cases, for example routine, while I introduced the word into the interviews, it was quickly taken up by students who were able to relate to the word. In yet other cases, for example reciprocity, pragmatism and online identity, I interpreted what was said and introduce a word which I believe

encompassed the range of related ideas put forward by the participants. Not all of the participants mention or allude to every theme. Some themes were more predominant in the participant students' interviews. However, all themes contribute in some significant way to an understanding of how this group of participants perceive engagement.

5.5.1 Connectedness²⁷

The desire to feel connected applied to all participants. In this context, connectedness was not the same as community (Rovai, 2002) but, as Rovai pointed out, an element of it. Students may have felt connected to a peer, or a group of peers, a full class of students or tutors, or perhaps even the institution. In another way connectedness was to the content or the idea of becoming a teacher.

In the context of this investigation, connectedness was mediated by technology. More than just technology, all participants identified the sense of mediation as a frustration from time to time. However, for the most part such frustrations were accepted as a part of the process (see pragmatism, below). From a negative perspective technology presented technical frustrations and the sense of mediation increased the feeling of transactional distance. However, from a positive perspective, what was evident was the acknowledgement of the technology being or becoming a critical part of the sense of connectedness and through it, a part of conversational relation. The loss of the use of some senses which were inherent to direct, face-to-face contact was acknowledged, but the development of other senses to respond to the new (technology) environment allowed for different forms of relation to develop. As will be seen later, Geraldine's sense of frustration when she *lost* her satellite connection was evidence of both the frustration of technology and her developing new skills for life online. Wanda, Rhonda and Jane typified how an occasional face-to-face meeting could act as an enhancement of their feeling of connectedness, rather than a replacement.

Connectedness was an important theme intellectually, socially and emotionally (personally) in bonding students to the unit and increasing their feelings of engagement. It brought students back to

²⁷ Connectedness in this context was applied to a more general feeling of being connected to peers, tutors, institution, profession and content, rather than necessarily grounded in a specific group as Rovai (2002) suggested in terms of learning communities.

the unit site, the activities, peers and tutors who lived with them there. The more technological options to help feel connected, the greater the possibility of feeling engaged because of the choices available. (Bill explained that he preferred the telephone for discussing specific issues with a tutor, rather than the discussion board. The availability of that option supported his feeling of being part of the unit group – but separate from some of the peers – and through that he felt more engaged.)

5.5.2 Reciprocity

Feeling connected to the unit, peers, tutors or the content was critical to feeling engaged, but the perception of reciprocation by others also featured strongly in participant student interviews. To be engaged, students wanted not just to contribute, but to receive (responses). While there was broad agreement between students and tutors that reciprocity contributed to student engagement, the difference between student and tutor understanding of reciprocity was identified in terms of initiation, personalisation and timeliness.

Data from tutor interviews evidenced an expectation that students initiated and maintained engagement. For tutors, issues of student numbers, frequency of contact and other workloads mitigated an immediate response from them. The difference in the level of priority given to reciprocity between tutors and students was a point of tension. However, while students articulated an understanding of the roles of tutors and the associated pressures, they also placed significant importance on the tutor initiating contacts and in reciprocating to student contact. For students, the initiating of contact by the tutor did not have to be one-to-one, but they expected a clearly defined mechanism for contacting students and identified protocols in responding positively to students. Not meeting these expectations impacted students' sense of engagement.

Another aspect of reciprocity is the degree of personalisation of the response by the tutor. Every participant student wanted to be acknowledged as an individual. Again, students understood that each tutor was dealing with many students and so more broadly targeted communications were acceptable. However, students anticipated a more personal response when specific contact was made. (Bill even went to the effort of setting up a phone call to receive a response to specific questions or

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issues which he had. He saw himself as a low level interactant so when he had an issue or question he was confident that it was appropriate for him to go directly to the tutor and receive a timely response.)

Connor's anecdote regarding students telling him that he didn't have to respond to their contacts immediately demonstrated that there was an understanding of the pressures on tutors. Timeliness of response was important but not critical (although Tricia noted the problem of getting responses too late to be included in her study timeline, or in the submission of her assignment). All participant students believed that, in an ideal situation, tutors should be available when needed, but they are also aware of tutors' other commitments.

Time in the distance online environment was qualitatively different for each student. In one sense technology and distance gave students more control over time; that is to say that they could construct time to suit their own needs and specifications, and set their own routines while studying online. However, their construction of time was not necessarily the same as that of peers and tutors. Similar issues of time and the inflexibility of unit structuring (Kahu et al., 2014; and Rhonda's experience of weekly releases of content) highlighted the disjuncture of timeframes between students and tutors/institutions that impacted reciprocity.

Reciprocity with other students was also an issue. Wanda, Mary, Bill, Tricia, Indigo and Geraldine all remarked on students not contributing to discussions and then expecting to get assistance from others in the group, particularly around assignment time. Equally, those who reciprocated, but in a manner not in keeping with group protocols (which may vary between groups and so were context specific – see Mann, 2005) were also singled out for criticism. The cases of younger students who were flippant (non-) contributors to discussion boards leading to their being ignored (that is postings under their names were not even opened), were specific examples of this action.

Lack of (timely) reciprocity in group work was a very common complaint from students and some tutors. It was blamed for significant breakdowns in the usefulness of collaborative online groups where only one or two members participated, thereby bearing a much greater workload.

5.5.3 Pragmatism²⁸

Pragmatism was a more difficult theme to discern. It was not to be confused with being a strategic learner as it was as much about attitude as process. Based on a set of established, but not well articulated priorities (involving relations with family, friends, work and peers), students were constantly making decisions regarding their next actions. In being able to take these decisions, some of which were complex and demanding, the fact that they were in control of their decision making was a positive influence on their feeling of engagement. Therefore pragmatism was not reactive, that is to say, not just fatalistically reacting to a situation. Pragmatism was a decision making skill to gain the greatest benefit from a very crowded life.

While student interviews revealed a certain feeling of 'it is what it is!' in the way students saw their distance online studies, I sensed that this demonstrated an understanding and acceptance of their unique situation.

Paradoxically, making decisions not to do certain activities (which perhaps a tutor thought were important) because the student decided something else was more important, often led to an increased feeling of control, and hence engagement, for students. In those cases, pragmatic student actions were actions which were typified by James and Albert as students doing the barest essentials to get through the course. From student responses it was more a judgement on their perception of the value of activities in terms of achieving anticipated outcomes.

Other pragmatic decisions, such as which group discussion threads to join, were based on evaluations of the level and quality of contributors in other group discussions. Making decisions regarding which students to develop online relations, were related to the perceived efficiency of

²⁸ "...[pragmatic] applies to the rules of art and technique which *are based on experience and are applicable to experience* (emphasis added)" (Ihde, 2009, p. 9).

working with the other, and the ease of achieving anticipated outcomes. Mediation of interactions such as these removed some of the emotion from decision making as, for example, one didn't need to worry about meeting corporeally. These were efficiency decisions which were applied in conjunction with the sense of potential for reciprocity and connectedness.

Application and relevance to work were other key factors in distance online students' engagement. Time in study and online was valued and protected. Being able to apply what was learned to the work context or to draw on experience to make sense of some issue being studied increased students' perception of engagement.

5.5.4 Involvement

Some aspects of on-campus students' involvement (Astin, 1984) also applied to distance online students. As was evident from reflecting on pragmatism, students valued productive study time as they had many other calls on their time. Therefore, online activities which were not perceived as relevant were avoided.

They also valued the opportunity to ask questions of their peers and tutors directly or on discussion boards. Equally students in this investigation valued the opportunity to answer questions posed by peers. Being able to be helpful was regarded by these students as part of developing relationships with the others online. Involvement in that sense was similar to interaction as described by Friesen and Kuskis (2012). This was involvement at a very demonstrable level. However, as Bill evidenced, he was academically involved and engaged, but did not demonstrate this through high levels of discussion board activity. Such 'lurking' is often construed by tutors negatively. He mentioned that he saw no reason to repeat what others said just for the sake of contributing. He routinely read the online postings, undertook suggested tasks and initiated contact with tutors as necessary. However, his tutors encouraged him to contribute more. Depending on the viewpoint, different judgements could be made regarding his level of involvement. Online environments made it difficult for accurate assessments of involvement as lurking students left little evidence of being involved, but yet may have felt involved and engaged.

Other factors of Astin's involvement (1984) were not relevant to distance online students. Distance study generally precluded social relationships, although as Jane, Rhonda, Mary and Wanda pointed out, some limited social relations with peers began online. However, these relationships developed with peers with whom they were able to meet, even irregularly.

5.5.5 Routine

Routines were more than time management: they related to process as well. Routines usually operated at more than one level. There was a time routine: time put aside for study, both how much study and when it was undertaken; within this routine, how much time and effort for online and offline activity (this was usually defined by the particular activities required and the scheduling of assessments); which days of the week were put aside for study days; and how much of the year was put aside for study. Study time and effort was extracted from life time and effort and set apart.

There was, for most students, also a process routine. For some students reading the assessment requirement and subsequently the assignments was the first activity at the beginning of the semester. Others had a routine of study activities which they followed each study session. A common routine for students in this investigation was to do certain units on specific days and in each case begin each session with a review of the discussion board posts. Students who articulated routines were clear about them. Holding to these routines was important to them. Whilst they were pragmatic enough to realise that occurrences in their lives would impact routines and cause them to change, they highlighted their aim to maintain the routine as far as possible to provide stability and certainty.

As students spoke, there appeared rhythms in their routines. Rhythms are a primitive part of the human experience. The rhythm of the seasons was important in controlling ancestors' lives. Rhythms provide some consistency in the patterns of everyday life: even a sense of control.

With routine supporting a sense of engagement in students, as might be expected, upset routines led to student consternation. For example: late release of assignment details, or even release times which upset the routine of study came in for heavy criticism from students and a number of

them stated that it led them to feel less engaged with that unit. Understanding and managing these routines and rhythms is useful in drawing students further into units.

5.5.6 Online identity

James posited that the faculty had embraced online learning as a mechanism to increase its enrolments without providing the necessary resources to properly attend to students. Tricia told of how sometimes she felt just like a number online. Emma spoke of her perceived soullessness of undergoing tutor training, online. To feel engaged, students (and tutors when they were online trainees) needed to feel that they were both *seen* online by others, and *seen* as individuals.

Distance online students are not unique in their efforts to balance their many identities. Student, parent, peer, friend and worker to name just a few all needed to harmonise with and within the context in which the students were operating at a specific time. Rhonda's unique position of being a wife and student at one time in a hospital room underlines the tensions of identity in everyday life.

Geraldine, Tricia and Bill, for example were reluctant to name themselves as students. They were more comfortable with a title of learner or trainee teacher. Student as a term held a traditional connotation for them, which did not include adult and off-campus. They saw younger on-campus individuals as students. On the other hand, Mary embraced being a student, complete with bumper sticker; even to the point that her children recognised university advertising and pointed it out as *her school*.

For this group, there was not a specific identity required to feel engaged, but rather the development of an identity to support their feelings of *a right to be there* (studying online) was part of the development of the feeling of engagement. However, it is worth noting that part of not identifying as a student related to not knowing what it felt like to be a university student. Socialisation and enculturation pressures appeared to be not as powerful off-campus online as on-campus. It was unclear from the data whether this was because of the mediated environment *per se*, or the lack of direct contact with more experienced student peers on whom to model, and from whom to learn such roles.

5.5.7 Online image

If the development of an identity in the online environment was influential in perceptions of engagement, then how that identity was portrayed online to peers and tutors - the image - was equally important. An image which elicited responses from peers and tutors that reinforced the student's identity supported a feeling of connectedness and feeling engaged. Wanda, Mary and Indigo were pleased when others positively responded to their online image. Students in this investigation were careful to present to peers and tutors as serious and conscientious, which was how they view themselves.

Online image was not merely the choice of photograph used on student pages, or the personal information provided in the allocated space. While these were important to image, it was the sum of an individual's actions on and contributions to the discussion boards, work in collaborative teams, and group work which was also important to the digital corporeal image.

The power and indelibility of image online was evidenced by the strongly held attitudes articulated by participants about the online actions and comments of their peers. All the participants were acutely aware of judgements of online actions being made. The fact that those who were being judged might not know it, and the difficulty of reversing those judgements, was coercive (Mann, 2005) and worked against developing more democratic learning environments. However, participants were aware of the need to feel part of the group in order to buttress their sense of engagement.

5.6 Conclusion

While much of the current research into engagement focused on educational outcomes, based upon a consideration of students as homogeneous and uni-dimensional, this study revealed students individually, and as a group to be complex and sophisticated, transitioning between roles and experiences, and negotiating and navigating issues of relations as they arose.

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The personal and sometimes emotional manner in which participants spoke of their perceptions of engagement and the impact on their lives was in stark contrast to a view of student engagement as purely an indicator of learning outcomes.

Understanding student engagement from distance online students' points of view removed the concept from a sole learning outcomes orientation to a more complex representation of the full environment of the students. Students did not come to this investigation with a view of engagement as a specific term or concept but were sensitive to the way in which their lived experiences formed and impacted their relationships with their study. Their immediate responses to the question of engagement highlighted their passion and commitment to their studies and their anticipated future.

Contextual issues surrounding these perceptions were canvassed through van Manen's (1990) four existentials, lived time, lived space, lived body and lived relations, to provide an insight into the personal nature of the participants' experiences.

Seven themes: connectedness; reciprocity; pragmatism; involvement; routine; online identity; and online image drawn from participants' perceptions of their own engagement emerged. These themes offered a lens through which to observe, and hopefully understand what stimulates, establishes and maintains their engagement.

Chapter Six: Impact of Educational Technologies on Student Engagement

This roller coaster of emotion still affects me now, when I remember the feelings, the anger and the sadness, the depression, which hit me when I had no access to the internet. I did not realise the extent of my reliance on the contact and therefore the importance this connection had in my life.

[Geraldine]

6.1 Introduction

As “all forms of interaction in a distance education context are, by definition, technologically-mediated forms of interaction” (Friesen & Kuskis, 2012, p. 352), it is important to foreground the impact of technology on participant perceptions of student engagement. Therefore, the impact which technology has on student engagement was canvassed with both participant students and tutors. These are deeper issues than discussing direct impact of technologies on student learning outcomes.

This chapter addresses the second research sub-question: *In what ways do educational technologies impact student engagement?* I begin by setting the context of the discussion with Geraldine’s story of her loss of her internet connection. Then to understand the impact of technology on engagement more deeply, I turn again to van Manen’s framework of four existentials, to bring to the foreground the key issues.

Within the university, the LMS, MyLO provides for unit members (unit designer, unit co-ordinator, tutors and students), a digital environment with tools ranging from standard and simple widely used technologies: discussion boards, chat rooms, audio and video, to more sophisticated technologies: web casts, presentation software, group work software, blogs, wikis and other social networking software/applications. With such a range of technological options there is inevitably a range of technical and pedagogical issues which require new skills.

As discussed in Chapter Three, one of the major issues in using the concepts underpinning lived experience is that they were originally conceived within a physical, rather than a distance or digital world. It was also pointed out that developing the dichotomies of physical and digital worlds was itself, a confection not necessarily recognised by the participants. However, the point needs to be made that technology impacts differently in the two environments. The firstly is in terms of how it impacts participants (in terms of their engagement) as they are being distance online students in their physical world; the secondly is how it impacts them as they are being students in their digital world.

6.2 A new part needed: Geraldine's story

As a starting point, and to provide a sense of the manner in which technological issues impact the experience of being a distance online student, I provide a short anecdote, a story written by Geraldine.

Geraldine arrived at our second interview a little late and proceeded to relate her story of satellite connection problems she had been experiencing. She seemed so affected by the incident that I asked her to write the story for me including what she had been feeling about the experience.

I have satellite internet and study fully online because of my location. There were three assignments due by today, I had planned to complete them and submit them a day or two early, as my internet connection kept dropping out. I received advice that a technician will arrive today to correct the fault. The technician arrived at 11.30am and worked until 1.30pm when he announced that the problem could not be corrected immediately, a part needed to be sent for so I would probably be without the internet for a week or more. I am glad I stuck to my plan and submitted assignments early.

But the feelings I was overcome with still surprise me now, on hearing I would have no internet for a week I felt absolutely devastated, I felt sick to the stomach and angry too. I felt sad and then railed against incompetent trades people, internet service providers and anyone in general. Once the ranting and raving had

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settled I apologised to all the people I had railed against. I planned where and how I would study and complete tasks and activities.

As I settled to accomplish this I realised I did not want to continue with the study, I did not want to do anything but sit and wait for the internet to be repaired. I am devastated, depressed and upset. I felt really cut off from everything and isolated from everyone. As well as studying online I keep in touch with my children online so the feeling of being alone was overwhelming. These feelings were tenfold on the isolation I thought had felt previously.

I planned to attend the university on the Monday as I had an appointment with Allan and took the opportunity to download lectures, readings, do research and also have an appointment with an advisor to discuss the possibility of changing my enrolment so that I am completing one or two units face to face next semester. This change was motivated by the realisation of how much I rely on and depend on the internet at home for study and to stay connected with people.

Not being totally reliant on one mode of study may stop such a strong reaction if this happens again. On Thursday the technician returned to fix the problem while I was volunteering at the local school, I couldn't concentrate at school that day and raced home to check if it was fixed. I immediately logged onto MyLO and checked the discussion boards, checked Facebook to see what my children were doing, and felt an immediate relief that I was connected again. This relief and the previous reactions convinced me, I had made the correct decision to study face to face if I could.

June 2012:

This roller coaster of emotion still affects me now, when I remember the feelings, the anger and the sadness, the depression, which hit me when I had no access to the internet. I did not realise the extent of my reliance on the contact and

therefore the importance this connection had in my life, but I am determined to spread my reliance over several modes of study next semester if I can and then maybe the overwhelming feelings of being unconnected and alone may not happen again?

This anecdote underlines the importance of Geraldine's feeling engaged with her study (that is her sense of connectedness). It was the loss of her satellite connection that foregrounded, in her mind, her loss of connection to others. Telling the story of her technical loss opened to us (through opening up to herself) the importance of connections in her life - connection with her family, her friends and her study. Her loss of connectedness was not only an intellectual loss, but also an emotional and social loss.

In spite of the misgivings she expressed, Geraldine is not a total online novice and felt reasonably comfortable with most technologies. Like all participant students, she did not see using technology as a specific impediment to engaging. However, from time to time she perceived there was an impact which she experienced more with some technologies: *I've always been fine with the technology. You know, I did two online courses last year, and part of the [previous business studies] course I did was online as well and that was years ago, so ... the technology side of it's never phased me. The only thing that does phase me are the web conferences where you've got the headset and you're talking. So I'm probably not a very good/you feel like you're talking to a machine. Yeah, that's the only part that really bothers me.*

Her relationship with technology changed when the technology brought attention to itself. As Friesen (2009) points out, when the technology being used is familiar and routine, it can "disappear from our awareness into the background, being simply 'handy' or becoming effectively 'invisible' or what Heidegger calls 'ready to hand'." (p. 128). Most participant students acknowledged the impact of technology on engagement at this level and in this way; for example: slow or variable connectivity, software conflicts (Tricia had installed Open Office which did not work with some applications in MyLO) and upgrades all brought an awareness of the technology to the user. Geraldine attributed her poor performance and lack of contribution (as perceived by her) during web conferences to an

awareness of the technology (*you've got the headset on and you're talking*). Those technologies, with which she was familiar, such as emails and discussion boards, were less foregrounded and contributed (as she saw it) to a more positive presentation of her online image.

Also of interest was her relationship with the technology. *I felt really cut off from everything and isolated from everyone*. She did not separate herself from the technology. She was *cut off* and *isolated* from things and others, not from the technology. This is indicative of an embodied relationship.

Geraldine was not alone in feeling the impact of technology on her engagement with her studies. All of the participants had experiences to relate.

6.3 Lifeworld existentials, technology and engagement

The difficulty of separating the four existentials (van Manen, 1990) came to the fore again in the online environment. As the interviews proceeded, the blurring of spatiality, corporeality and relationality in the online study context became evident, at least in part from the lack of meeting and interacting in a physical context. The blurring led to some issues in the discussion below being approached from more than one perspective.

6.3.1 Lived time

In Chapter Five, Ida told how her need to care for her children by taking them to sports and other activities impacted the time and space of her engagement with study. Technology had an impact through its ability to enable her access to study opportunities during such times: *And if I've got a few hours to spare in between, when I do my prac on Wednesdays and when I have to pick one of them [her children] up, I will bring my computer I will work in the car. So there is always a text with me [laugh] and you gotta to get it done*.

Technologies such as books (old technologies) and laptops (with or without mobile internet access) re-defined the time (and space) of her study. Possible down-times, referred to earlier, became study opportunities. Technologies made time more malleable and available so that she could either fit

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more study time into her weekly activities, or use some of the 'freed-up' study time for other activities.

With mobile internet access any time was available for study, thus increasing the sense of participants' control over their study. Rhonda's sense of connectedness was reinforced by her 24 hours per day, seven days per week access, thus impacting her engagement. *Technology's come so far that you can be connected and up-to-date anywhere and there was some really important announcements coming through for one of my courses and I didn't feel like I missed out, whereas if I'd have only got them yesterday, you know, Wednesday night being home; I would have panicked. I would have felt really uncertain about things being left 10 days after they were sent. It would have put me behind.* Technology allowed Rhonda to feel freer, and with this freedom to feel less stressed.

With this availability came the potential for unavailability. Should the materials or activities held in MyLO not be available or a technology not be working, the delay tended to distort time, the effect sometimes continuing through the participants' study program. Jane was angry because the time she had planned to use in specific ways was being reclaimed by someone else's problem. Her time was being changed by someone else: *Um, I went to do the online quiz because it had crashed the week before, so we had to re-sit it because New Zealand had a blackout and there was a link to New Zealand. So technology's not always great because we had spent an hour and ten minutes or an hour and a bit doing the test and then having to re-sit it and re-study it.*

Greater complexity in technology potentially makes time more flexible and potentially increases the creativity of the pedagogy. However, it also increases the possibility of malfunctions of technology which can truncate time available for study. The impact on Jane's sense of engagement at that point was clear. *And then those who had actually managed to sit the quiz before the blackout they got an extension on all the other assignments, just like the rest of us did. And it's just like why? It's just not fair. And so they got a free week of being able to study the next week's readings and studies, where we had that as well as having to re-sit another assignment.*

With time at a premium, the ability to manipulate the digital environment was seen as positive.

Bill: *There's been a couple of lectures over the time that have been recorded, obviously been recorded during the face-to-face lecture, and you'll start, ... and you'll hit play and you'll sit there and you're waiting for someone to talk and you can hear shuffling of papers and all the rest of it and then after five minutes or so .. "all right, now that you're all here", OK, and then you know it's recorded and then "I'd just like you to have a think about this for a while, I'll give you 10 minutes to think about it." And then there'll be virtual silence for about 10 minutes and you'll sort of find yourself clicking on the little drag bar along the bottom to try to assume what 10 minutes is to get you know, ... depends if it's worth thinking about for 10 minutes!*

The 10 minutes of thought for the face-to-face class differed from Bill's 10 minutes. Bill's had shrunk time to match his perception of the value of time and usefulness of activity. The technology empowered him to make the decision on the value of the content (whether he is correct in his assessment is for another discussion) in the context of the time it was taking and the other things (study or non-study) he felt he needed to do. Technology delivered Bill more opportunity to manipulate time than he perceived students in class had: *you're thinking about what the 20 odd people in front of the lecturer are doing, for these ten minutes.*

Most participants managed the discontinuities between lived time of the digital and physical by developing routines and formally apportioning time spent on and off line. These routines differed between participants, but most participants were consistent in their routine. Putting aside the efficiencies of this process; that is, being sure that they were up to date and did not repeat questions on the discussion board, it is interesting to reflect on the way this process developed a different view of time. Time at the discussion boards could stretch or shrink according to the number of posts and the level of interest. This was in stark contrast to the set length of a lecture or tutorial. In these events, the access to information, activity and response was time limited and controlled by the tutor (unit co-ordinator). However, in general, once through the MyLO portal time became more elastic and more manipulable.

Time also changed meaning with respect to online discussions. Verbal discussions were, unless recorded, of a temporary and sequential nature. They took a certain time, one spoke and then another and then the words were gone to memories in the domain of listeners, whereas online discussions ran in parallel and acquired permanence. There were even protocols as to how long the discussion, and the discussion board, might exist. While the discussion boards were in existence, the ideas were always the property of the person against whose name they appeared. Their longevity was no longer dependent on the cadence of time, but was controlled by the tutor who could leave them or remove them. This was the same whether it was written text or stored recorded audio files such as podcasts.

Mary sensed the ongoing presence or timelessness of online communication: *even if you don't get on the discussion boards to have that, you know, that Facebook type chat, you know the general discussion type stuff just constantly being in there, I mean it's how you connect.*

In this context, time was not measured in seconds or minutes or even hours. Time was measured in presence, in a feeling of connectedness. While there was a feeling of connectedness – reading (hearing) what others had to say – ‘outside’ time did not necessarily move forward; it could stop only to restart when the feeling of connectedness is lost or an intrusion came from the outside.

Lived time in the online world was not a simple sequential forward movement: it had a non-temporal value. It was also measured in terms of usefulness. If time spent online was not useful it was considered slow moving or lost. Jane pointed to the extra time needed to organise an online chat and the possibility of last minute change of plans – an example of the constant pragmatic assessment of time in all its forms - to gain the best outcome for the most efficient use. She did not wish to *waste time* finding out who is available online: *Um no, because you never know when people are online. So that's a difficulty. Like with Facebook you get a little dot of whose actually there – with MyLO, you don't know who else is posting. So that's the difficult part and pre-organising a chat [means finding out who is] going to be available at seven and then something comes up, kids may be sick and you just sort of can't get on there to apologise ...*

To *save time*, participants avoided reading postings which were non-targeted and not related to the study at hand. To prevent becoming lost in the reading of discussion board postings they needed to make informed decisions about what and how much to read. As a longer term user Wanda felt that she had developed time saving skills: *Because the 'keen types' get on with ridiculous questions, and it's easy to second guess yourself or get confused and so you just avoid them altogether. And when you first start, you feel the need to read everything, but you get more judicious.* When asked how she made these decisions, she said: *Oh you just avoid the extraneous rubbish. I don't need to sit there and know how big does the margin have to be. 'Look up the manual.' [...] You know when something's important and something's not. You usually know, this is what I want to know; is it there? No it's not and you filter it out. You know, some people get really stupid on them. Like, if they've got a complaint, they can get quite vitriolic.*

Time online was divided into two components. The first was a 'when' component: that is when a participant went online. This varied between participants. Some, such as Geraldine, Mary and Wanda, evidenced above, had routines which would see them online at certain times each day. Others such as Ida, Rhonda and Bill, were more opportunistic, being online when they were able to *find time*.

The second component of online time was the 'how long' component. For some, for example Bill, Indigo and Tricia, it was only as necessary, to do what was needed. Others, for example Mary, Jane and Rhonda told how they keep their connection going in the background much of the time. For Mary, this even extended into the semester breaks: *Um, and the I think that once you get into that routine, and you become engaged and you do kind of get drawn in; and at the end of the semester it's just like, oh my God what am I gonna do now? And you're continually going back to MyLO to check, because you just have to because it's part of your whole/ that's what you do every day.*

Once online the sense of passing time also impacted the participants' sense of reciprocity. Mary's receipt of quick responses was not Tricia's experience: *You can ask questions and you can get answers, but it's the world's longest conversation. And there's no fluidity; it's so disconnected; and Ida's It doesn't feel like talking to someone, because you've gotta wait for the answer. And, I suppose I'm impatient*

Mary perceived that the tutor was there because of the feedback which was provided. The online tutor appeared to be *in there* all the time. Whether this was true or whether the tutors were using the technology to alert when students left a posting, the speed of response time impacted perceptions of involvement and reciprocity. Mary's perception of availability came from previous experience: *The face-to-face students can sit there all around a room and they can throw ideas back and forth for the whole hour or two hours. Online, you've got people throwing those ideas around from seven AM Monday morning through to seven PM Sunday night. But they're in there. You know some of the tutors are actually in there and they're providing that feedback, constantly. Um, so you sort of get that sense that they're interested in what you have to say. They're interested in developing your ideas and you feel that you can go to them.*

Waiting online for a response, or having to come back later for a response stretched time, and increased frustration. Also, with students communicating online, perceptions of speed of response from tutors sometimes became an online discussion point, leading to disengagement for those who felt that they had slower responses.

For participants, at one level, online lived time was about seconds, minutes, hours or even days and weeks, spent online and invested in their future. At another level, it was also about vocabulary, punctuation, ownership and permanence of concretised textualised thoughts and logic set in a particular time, but which could be revisited. They could go back in time to see what had happened or had been said. Online time could be manipulated, so could be adapted to meet student needs rather than organisational structures. It lengthened and disengaged while waiting for a response to a question. Technology placed students in a position of power, but could cruelly remove control with one technical glitch. Importantly, those participant students who appeared to adapt their understanding of time to the online environment spoke in terms which indicated to me a greater sense of engagement.

6.3.2 Lived space

Being a university student means attending a university. The first impression of a university for most people is of bricks and mortar, or perhaps sandstone, trees and grass. The physical environment provides the context for what is about to happen. As van Manen (1990) points out, “the space in which we find ourselves affects the way we feel” (p. 102). Lecture theatres, tutorial rooms, libraries, staff offices and of course the refectory or cafe, work together to create the feeling of a university space.

Why begin this section with this statement? All participants, whether or not they had any on-campus experience, had seen this representation of universities in the media, or heard about it from friends. However, their university space was digital, and for the most part their study space was found in MyLO. It was in this space that they lived as students. Space for students within MyLO is defined by the course structure. An analogy might be of the course as the nation state and the units which comprised the nation state might be considered provinces – perhaps some more provincial than others. Units were presented through this technology as discrete, that is independent, provinces. That is to say, one had to open different screens in a web browser to be involved in different units. For some participants this independence of unit created a disconnect between units, camouflaging the sense of a comprehensive and related course as opposed to a collection of units.

Participants who had attended on-campus summer schools, identified the impact of technology on the space of their study by comparing their technologised study experience with the summer school experience. Ida identified the difference between spaces dedicated to learning and those which were not: *Well you're in a room, and I think that my problem is because I've got work and kids, and I've gotta try and lock myself away from those to focus on uni and that's the hardest thing, which is for anyone I suppose these days so when you're in uni on a actual day on campus, or for four days at that stage it was, you're totally focussed on that, there's nothing else to take you off on a tangent.* Ida highlighted the fact that as a distance online student the technology that encompassed her study space still left her in the space that is mostly home, subject to all of the meaning, constraints and distractions it carried. The feeling of the

campus room and absence of children enabled her to focus. The space provided meaning: to be a student. MyLO placed her in two spaces at the same time.

For Wanda, who had attended on-campus summer schools, there were other ways to differentiate the two spaces where she studied. Her description of campus was not physical: *When we'd go to summer school and we'd have a week on campus, we were different to when we are at home. You spent the whole week drunk. We always used to joke and oh, we couldn't bear to be a full time campus student. We couldn't cope. I drank more in that week than I drank in a year.* [laugh] The campus space had a social element which assisted Wanda to feel like (her perception of) a student. The online space could not help her feel such a social experience of study. As Clark (2011) points out, what is done in one space takes on a different meaning in another. Wanda still perceived herself as a student in the online space, but not in the same manner in which she perceived it at summer school. Technology was able to provide part of a student experience for her, but not what she perceived to be the full experience. However, she recognised this and was content with a lack of social interaction of this type being a cost of her study: *It's the only choice I have; to do it this way, so that's it.*

Space provided by MyLO is constrained at two levels: first, the pedagogic structural assumptions on which the platform for MyLO (Desire2Learn) has been developed have their origins in North American higher education. Course structures, terminology and culture of North America all permeate the LMS, which may remove it in some ways from on-campus culture. Secondly, within these design constraints, MyLO is structured according to a design developed by the university and thence the way in which the unit coordinator organises it, so is firmly located in the culture and power relationships of that institution. While participants seemed not to worry about this, there was a sense that the structure was felt by some of them. Bill and Ida both made comments about the number of discussion boards and Jane about only being able to do certain things on certain boards. Habitation of this place is therefore as a visitor, or perhaps renter, rather than as an owner.

Asked about impacts of the design of the online unit on her engagement Tricia replied: *It depends entirely on the course, the tutor and the students who are on line with me. I certainly feel engagement*

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with students. But that has a lot to do with how units are set up – some units very much encourage discussion boards and what not; and some just say, “Look we don’t want you to talk to each other”. Actually, I had one this semester that was like that, which was a surprise. Saying “we’d rather you didn’t talk about this and if you have a question email me about it, don’t put it on a discussion board, so we can keep the answer secret. Very strange – this one I’m doing.

Tricia felt that spaces within the unit were not welcoming both because of the course/unit design and the technology structure. The technology turned curriculum and course design into visual/space design. Physical space reflected conceptual space. She understood that these online spaces were circumscribed and defined by the rules/protocols associated with their use. This was reminiscent of Perriton and Reedy’s (2002) proposition that the micro-politics of the online environment play a negative role in students developing their identity and involvement. If this impact on identity development and sense of involvement arising from the design of the online space is negative, then the space (design) contributes to constraining student engagement.

The pre-structured design of the online space in units could, either intentionally or unintentionally, lead to students experiencing alienation. Indigo felt this alienation when she was unable to find information stored on the unit MyLO space: *I looked for the assessment sheet, but it wasn’t/ I couldn’t find it. It took me an hour to eventually come up with it after I asked on the board.* Whether this was a space or design problem, or a lack of focus on Indigo’s part, the difficulty in finding what she wanted impacted her engagement at that point.

As a tutor, Albert acting in the unit designer role had created an online unit with considerable thought as to how best he could ensure that the students kept up to date and identified problems early and then be identified by him as being a student at risk.

Albert: *There are those that still undertake the engagement, if you like, and they commit the time and they puzzle away at things. And that was why I put these little critical questions tests in. I thought what I’ll do is I’ll ask four questions at the end of each week’s work to see if they’ve got the main ideas. They have three opportunities to do the test, and there’s an hour to do the*

questions. So there's bags of time and if they don't get through the critical question test, they can't access the next week's materials. So it gave me a wonderful way of keeping my eye on progress for the entire student cohort. And also to be able to force the students, the distance students particularly to ask for help, because so often, one can get to this stage in the semester, and all of a sudden the problems are coming up. But I've tried to make it so that every week there was the impetus for students to actually find out if they had learned what they were intended to.

The design of this online unit was based on pedagogy arising from the experience of previous teaching. However, students operating in the online space saw it differently and shared the frustration and subsequent disengagement because of the technology walls which were in place.

Technology can tighten the link between space function and meaning. Spaces were given names which implied their expected use and meaning such as *discussion board* or *collaborative work space*. Jane would have liked to have special spaces for timewasters. She despaired about the appropriateness of some postings (another term unique to the online space) to a discussion board: *because with MyLO some of the discussion boards, especially around assignment time, is just silly things like "How do I reference this" or "What do I do here" and so sometimes I think you need an area on the discussion board where it is just the silly questions and it's not the actual study. ... I opened it on Monday morning and there was like 83 posts and I had only looked at it Saturday night and it was just silly things like "When is the assignment due", "I can't find this reference", "How do we do this".*

Rhonda felt more comfortable in a social media space that her small group owned than the formal learning space which was owned by someone else: *Well we've been really fortunate this year, um one of the girls in one of courses set up a Facebook page and through that we engage every day, more often than on MyLO, because not feeling the limit of what we can say and we express how we're actually feeling.*

The use to which participants put the discussion board was more than writing some ideas or reading what others had to say; it was a way of using the space to reinforce their identity to themselves and to develop an image to present to others and to develop their image of others, both

peers and tutors. Rhonda and Jane saw Facebook pages as more personal spaces in which to write. It was still online, but with a sense of privacy as they had set it up for a more select audience. There were still limits to what they said in these spaces, but there were different limits. The spaces were clearly demarcated by their different locations.

Like Mary and Geraldine, Rhonda and Jane were conscious that the computer (or other device) which became part of them as they entered their study space, was also their connection to other spaces for personal daily activities, including connecting with family and conducting family banking and other life-business activities. They found it difficult not to be constantly aware of their online study space, as it was so closely associated with the entry to many other spaces in their lives. These symbols of their study spaces were fully integrated into their daily routines; as their home studies were with their family lives.

Lived space online appeared to be defined by most participant students in terms of their experience of campus space. However, they were making a transition to understanding this new study space. New terms were adopted. Discussion board was a term which was simple and clearly defined what the purpose of the space was; but not so clearly that Jane saw a need to create sub-spaces there for *silly questions*. Participants became able to distinguish the difference in meaning of these spaces and the rule and protocols (said/written and unsaid/unwritten) which defined them.

6.3.3 Lived body

The issue of corporeality in the online world was a focus of participants in thinking about the impact of technology on engagement. What happens when first we meet people online? One of the few issues raised by all of the participants, both students and tutors, was the difficulty of trying to work with someone whom they had not met face-to-face. Wanda was glad that she had been able to meet peers at residential schools with whom she had developed long term, robust friendships. Jane was adamant that the development of a group of peers who meet regularly, if not often, had supported her study. Bill found that colleagues at the school where he worked while studying provided back-up and motivation for him.

In online text spaces—discussion-boards, email, blogs—we come to know the other through writing alone. Relation is not perturbed or infected by visuality or orality, physical presence or vocal discourse. ... we read and are read by the other's text (Van Manen & Adams, 2009, p. 17).

The bodily presence to which others might normally react was not apparent in this online environment. The lived body through which others are met in the online space, at least in part, is a textual construct which could be consciously developed and maintained – a type of textual cosmetic surgery. Felt disembodiment in this case initially made it difficult for participants to develop relationships. In online education there was no body to see: no body to know, evaluate and to which to respond. The broad perception of all participants, both students and tutors, was that knowing the other, face-to-face provided extra insights into that other, and strengthened the relationship. Ida expressed a concern with the lack of non-verbal cues and clues to help her to interpret what was being *said* online. *There's more to communication than, than what is read. I think I get a lot of cues from other aspects of people. You know, when you're talking face to face with them. There's more communication/ I think the words say 10 percent, but other things, you know the way people move; you know size, their eyes rolling or whatever, there's those cues, so I think, not being able to read the person, and what they're saying, I'm not really getting what they're saying. Properly or with meaning for me.* Without the feeling of their bodily presence, Ida felt that there was not the possibility of the greater revelation of things which enabled deeper relationships to develop and be later exploited.

Ida further highlighted her disappointment (shared by many other participants) that technology didn't allow a more corporeal meeting with tutors and peers. *Yes they do at the beginning of the unit, say who they are, what they've done and all their bits and pieces in brackets – what they've done, which doesn't really blend in with me because I like to know the person, more so than what they've got after their name. I'm not that type of person.* She felt a more authentic relationship could be built on a face-to-face meeting. However, the individual can “conceal something at the same time – not necessarily consciously or deliberately, but rather in spite of ourselves” (van Manen, 1990, p. 103).

Asked about the relative ease or difficulty of engaging with others online, Bill immediately tapped into issues of corporeal disclosure and concealment: [pause] *I guess, I guess because it's probably the same reason that things like online bullying are so prevalent. Because it's faceless, you don't* [pause] *nobody's judging you on anything but what you've got to say. I think that when you meet people face-to-face or when you speak to someone, you can gather a bit out of their body language or their, you know, sort of, as soon as you meet someone, you round them out as a whole with that instant um, first impression, if you like. Whereas online and written you can't.*

Bill highlighted the singularity of the information transmitted and received online, its role in creating corporeal uncertainty in the minds of those involved. For him there were two outcomes. Positively there was the possibility of people being less judgemental. Negatively, lack of information about others made it harder to engage with them. He also pointed to the possibility of anonymity leading to bullying. However, this might be an issue for online more generally as in MyLO all participants are clearly identified and tracked.

As online students and tutors were not physically bodily in the digital world, there was a need for them to develop an understanding of others without previously seeing them in their physical landscapes. They met in an online or digital landscape; a world created by others and one which was often contextually poor and depleted of environmental clues. For most participants, the extension of this position was that the online body was a lesser being than the physical body and therefore provoked a need for remediation, or as Ihde (2001) puts it – 'compensatory effort'. Feenberg (2004) argues that our use of language is critical to the presentation of ourselves through online writing.

We could be said to "wear" language online in something like the sense in which we wear cloths (*sic*) in everyday life. It is a form of virtual embodiment as surely as what the fancy video goggles display. Others can often identify us from a few lines of our writing. We identify with it too as our extended bodily presence, in this case a strange kind of textual cyborg (p. 107).

Participants found it difficult to explain how they imagined the virtual embodiment of peers and tutors. However, as in any interaction they made judgements based on the available information. Therefore, from their own perspective, to a person, they understood the importance of the image which they present online and its implications for their future relations with others online. Wanda provided what was for me, the quintessential view.

I know these people are younger. And when I say younger, they're in their early thirties, but they're the Facebook generation; they're used to spilling their guts online and they've got no shelter. They just think, oh yeah I'm only talking to the people in the group. But, it's written, it's there, forever. Anyone can cut and paste, copy, print. It's there, you've just gotta watch what you say. [...] That one woman one day was going on about how she couldn't wait until the first parent teacher interview 'cause it would be her job to tell parents how to raise their children. And you're thinking, oh good luck with that one honey. [laugh] Deadly serious.

Technology created in their minds a world disconnected from the physical world: two worlds that would not meet. The impact of this was that they revealed more of themselves online than they might have in a physical world, with little concern for the possible meeting (or colliding) of their two worlds.

In their investigation of intended image and problematic profile content, Peluchette and Karl (2010) came to the conclusion that for the most part, in social network sites, people were aware of the (in)appropriateness of their postings, but as it was related to the present rather than the future. With regard to their understanding of potential future problems arising from what they contributed online: "It appears that there is comfort in anonymity. That is, these individuals may feel, "If I don't know them, why should care what kind of image I portray?" (Peluchette & Karl, 2010, p. 35).

Within the online environment, the opportunities to provide formally, pieces of personal information which might define the lived body were usually structured. They were located in defined spaces in/on the unit site, and their use was mostly optional. Importantly, whether or not that space (opportunity) existed was controlled by the unit designer and rarely the tutor, unless she or he was

also the unit designer. This meant that the online space may be as foreign to tutors as it was to students.

Online embodiment was not static. Technology enabled a photograph or personal information to be altered at any time during the semester. The photo which was used was not the result of a chance encounter in a corridor on campus, but one selected to (re)present a specific embodiment of an individual to his/her peers and tutor. Every participant had the opportunity to provide an image of themselves, but as van Manen and Adams (2009) point out: “Even when online interaction is combined with facial images, text and face may still be difficult to reconcile” (p. 17).

Personal information was often solicited at the beginning of each unit to promote a feeling of connection, through the tutor posting a greeting and suggesting students respond. However in this context, technology also allowed students to choose to portray themselves in ways that avoided physical description. Tricia did not see the point of providing personal information to people she would never meet: *I find especially at the start of every unit they say “Introduce yourself” and now I’m saying – “I’m four semesters in – I’ve got the hang of things – if you’ve got any questions I’m in a better position to help you now than I was two years ago”*. The technology allowed Tricia to provide information that she felt might be useful to others rather than a textual description of her physical or professional self.

Alternatively, Wanda shared how her online image presented her as self-assured, but behind that was significant insecurity: *a lot of people said to me online I come across as I just, I seem to know everything and I’m very secure in my knowledge of things. Which makes me laugh, because I sit there for hours and agonise over every word, [laugh] and think, oh God do I sound like an idiot? But then I have people say to me: “But you always know what’s going on.” And you think [giggle] see it from my side, you know. Not really.*

MyLO provided options for richer descriptions of the “textual cyborg” than those available in a solely textual exchange online. Potentially these are extensions to participants’ bodies which signify their presence to others. Physical bodies are backgrounded but meaningful interactions with others are still experienced in the online world. Clark (2011) emphasises: “how easily we engage in our daily

tasks without taking reflective notice of our corporeality” (p. 61). In the participants’ online world it was only when the lack of physical bodies was foregrounded, possibly through my interview process, that the corporeal impact on interactions became obvious to them.

Distance online students needed to develop other skills to gather the available information about others, and to interact in meaningful ways. We interpret the physical world through our physical senses. However, it took time for participants to learn those skills needed to gather relevant information in an online environment. Making judgements online was about more than the number of words and the frequency of contact. The lived body online was evidenced by warmth and emotion. These qualities were projected and received, and facilitated improved communication and relationships. Reciprocity and some shared emotion also helped develop an image of the other. As Indigo said: *There was one last year on research actually, Trent, he was good, it was good just to go in to and look at his replies even to other students because he had a funny side of him I suppose. [laugh] Very light hearted, and that was nice to get to think well, these are really people after all.*

Indigo looked for qualitative differences in the way tutors responded to her and her peers and proposed humour as an indicator of engagement. Geraldine felt less secure about her use of these skills in the online environment. While she understood that she was able to infer some information from her online interactions, she had little faith in the validity of her inferences: *‘cause you don’t/unless somebody on the discussion board actually says: “this is how old I am”, you really don’t know. Sometimes you can tell a person is a little bit more mature by some of the views they put forward on certain subjects, and you think: “oh that person might be a bit older/a bit closer to my age”, but you don’t know. They might not be.*

Her ambivalence in accepting that she could make valid judgments online evidenced a lack, or self-perceived lack, of online competence. The context surrounding student embodiment online, be it photographic or textual, is controlled by the person presenting only in its presentation, not its reception or interpretation. They have little control over the context of the reception of the image (both the technological context – hardware and software; and the physical/geographical context), which also impacts on its meaning to others.

Bill appreciated the physical anonymity which was provided online enabling people to present themselves in a manner which was under their control, not the control of others or the physical environment. He was aware that he presented a particular online image. As the most usual manner for students to communicate with each other and contribute to the group discussion, the discussion board was by far the most widely used instrument in the online corporeal arsenal. With other forms of communication such as phone, chat and email being more private, the discussion board was the place where students most often revealed more of themselves to the larger tutorial group.

As a diligent student, Bill was aware that his view of himself was not always the one being received by others online.

... on the whole I guess I've got a lot of opinions. I read a lot of other people's posts and a lot of the lecturers often comment that I don't participate enough. Um, you know, I might make a post here and there and they'll say that I've got very valuable things to offer, but not enough of it. And, I look at some of the things people write on there and it's a bit like a chat room to a bit of an extent and I sort of think, you know, if you haven't got anything worthwhile to say, probably don't say anything. Arh, and then there is some people on there who it just would appear that they live to help other people which I guess arh you're gonna get people like that because it's part of the teaching profession, isn't it? But arh, you know. People will pose questions and somebody, it seems, there'll be one in every group or one or two in every group that have always got the answers to everything you need to know.

In many ways Bill may be considered a lurker²⁹. In his monitoring of discussion groups and other online interactions he was a vicarious interactor (Friesen & Kuskis, 2012). Bill contributed, perhaps not as much as some others, but he was measured and like all pragmatic, focussed distance online students, he did not want to waste his, or other people's time, with chat, and felt uneasy in the digital environment. Bill, with a job, wife and young family needed to be strategic regarding the

²⁹ Friesen (2011) points out, that lurker is a pejorative term.

amount of time he has available for study. However, he saw a positive for some in the online environment. Bill returned to his anonymity idea:

... It takes a little while to categorise, where they're coming from and er, yeah, I guess judgements can be made. I guess some people if they're a little insecure about the way they look or they, at the risk of sounding horrible, someone they could be overweight, underweight; they could be attractive, or not, anything; it's so genderless, everything's taken away and you're left with is the opinion which is comforting to a lot of people, I guess.

In this digital study space, his opinion was his embodiment. The physical, which could be a distraction, was left behind. The technology has forced him to re-think himself.

In claiming her identity as an online student, Mary highlights the dependence which she has developed on this space; not merely because of structure and artefacts it provides for her study, but because of the part it plays in her identity. For her, MyLO symbolises the space of her student identity – her studentness - and her connectedness; a place where she becomes involved with the content, performed her study routines and engages with tutors and peers. The student role in her life was acutely foregrounded when her option to engage was taken from her during her between semester holidays. It was *wonderful* to get away from the assignments; to feel the successful conclusion of the unit, but then, a hole appears: *... and at the end of the semester it's just like, oh my God what am I gonna do now? And you're continually going back to MyLO to check, because you just have to because it's part of your whole/ that's what you do every day.*

Wanda was made aware by others of her control over her image. *I know that I can seem to be /I have been called intimidating, and dominant. So, I do tend to not do it very often: if I can avoid it. [laugh]* She has developed online perception skills to know when she was dominating discussion. *You can tell when you're dominating because all of a sudden conversation will stop. And then when you do meet these people face to face, they're very: I've found, a lot of people are then reticent to speak to me and when they do speak to me they go "you know, you're not at all what I thought you'd be. I'd been scared of you online, and if I saw you talking I wouldn't."*

The impression which others developed of her online was based on her ability to use time to develop considered responses thereby underpinning her image as *intimidating and dominant*. Her text which was the product of anguish and hours was read as being just one part of a continuous conversation. What appeared as natural online was not what felt natural to Wanda. Using her well developed online skills, the technology enabled her to control, at least in presentation, her online image which was not necessarily based on her identity.

Given the constraints of transactional distance, technology, specifically MyLO in this case, provided the opportunity for the development of a sophisticated image out of disembodiment. However, a new skill set needed to be developed.

6.3.4 Lived other

In common with the lived body online, lived relations (relationality) online was mediated and therefore impacted by the technology which mediated it. Consider silence. Silence when communicating with someone face-to-face could actually be ‘saying’ something. Combined with non-verbal clues, silence could mean that the other is uncomfortable with what has just been said or what might be about to be said. Perhaps it might mean thinking, or waiting for more information. Online silences were much more difficult to interpret as Wanda related:

[long pause] *Well, they're probably the same as me, a little bit insecure about their ability. They just need to put it out there. I do tend to, I get bored if nothing's happening. I mean, the whole thing is that you're supposed to interact on these boards, I mean, somebody has to say something first so it gets to the point, where I can't help it, I'll chuck something out there*

[laugh] *And I can remember one unit when no one spoke so I put on about eight successive postings and spoke to myself, just to see what would happen. Like you know, I put up a posting saying "oh I think this, this, this and this." And left it for about four hours. And nothing happens and then I replied: "do you really think so Wanda. You know I don't know that I agree with that; and it went on for about eight posts before somebody posted: "You make me laugh". But that was all that came of it. No one else would put anything up. [laugh]*

Wanda was an initiator. She wanted to be involved in discussion and develop relationships online, but was frustrated by the silence of others. Being unable to interpret what caused silence she tried to stimulate discussion. Perhaps it was fear, as she suggested, but she had no way of knowing. Her efforts stimulated at least one response, but not one she expected. Mann (2005) suggests that such difficulties in online communications lead to an “alienation from the capacity to engage meaningfully in order to pursue individual and group learning agendas” (p. 47). She identifies two reasons why this might happen.

Firstly, it is a new medium of communication for many people, and may thus be presumed to entail new communication conventions, which may be unequally known. And secondly, as a medium, it reduces the communication cues available to one in order to establish identity and feedback online (p.47).

She argues that this is caused, not by a breakdown in the online community, but by a failure of communication. This failure of communication includes a failure on the part of all community members to understand or be aware of the others as individuals; including their experiences of the learning environment, “their desires, interests and fears within it [...] and conversely, ... the teacher’s purpose; the assumptions behind their approach” (p. 48). In part this was exemplified by Wanda’s experience: the fear of getting it wrong. Her peers may have appeared disengaged because they (wrongly) assumed that all answers to questions online must be correct and complete, and to ask a question or seek clarification was to show ignorance.

In essence, the communication which was seen in this digital environment was more than speaking with each other, or the tutor. As Perinbanayanagam and McCarthy (2012) pointed out:

People do not just *interact* with each other; rather, they *engage* with each other using the visual and verbal instruments of communication at their disposal, constructing meaningful and intelligible conversations with differing degrees of precision of intention and clarity of expression. *Engagement is the active and*

systematic use of already mastered elements of language to deliberately influence the other's attitudes, emotions, and actions. (p. 192: their emphasis)

When any tools had been mitigated by the nature of the technologised environment in which this engagement was taking place, the actors felt uneasy, perhaps without understanding why. They saw this as a deficit situation and reacted accordingly. For example *I like to put a face to a name.* [Jane] In the absence of any tool, there may be a negative reaction or overcompensation. In Tricia's response we can interpret both the negative feeling of alienation and the overcompensation through extra efforts to reciprocate and be more supportive of peers who are supportive of her.

A: *And do you work the same with them? Do you respond to them in similar ways?*

Tricia: *Absolutely – as much as I can. I guess it's a karma thing – you see there are people who jump on towards the end – you know the day before assignments are due and they go "So what's this about?" and you think well I am not even going to answer them because they've made no effort. But the people that have been helping me and they then come up with a question and you recognise names that are familiar – the ones – the helpful people – oh my goodness I feel like I owe them a debt of helpfulness.*

A debt of helpfulness is an interesting way of describing her sense of connectedness and reciprocity. Tricia and her peers developed, within their group, shared values of assistance and acceptance. For those outside the group trying to enter without demonstrating that they too shared those values, there was non-acceptance. This outcome did not arise from a "freely negotiated learning process" (Perriton & Reedy, 2002, p. 7) as relationality in this case was based on shared values. In an online environment the control of group membership is easier, and perhaps more ruthless because the other will remain faceless.

In a similar show of ruthlessness, (my bias) the technology enabled Mary to cull the *duds* from her group. With so many posts on discussion boards, particularly in large online 'classes', Mary felt that she had developed skills to improve her choice of collaborators.

Mary: *.....but I've been put with some duds. I don't like carrying them.*

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A: *Can you tell a dud before a group starts?*

Mary: *Yeah, I think you can.*

A: *You're online, you're remote from people: what clues do you look for?*

Mary: *I think it's the general/especially now, like where the names of people/there's a few new names that I come across now even though I'm in fourth year and I've done full time, because they've merged the units. They've merged the onliners and the face-to-facers. So, every now and then, I'll come across a new name because it's somebody who's predominately done face-to-face and you haven't had to deal with them - well not deal with them, but haven't met. Through the time you sort of get used to the/you sort of get to know this one's a dud, that one's a dud, because initially you've been looking at those responses. You know in the earlier years when you're at uni and you're trying to find your way, or find your feet and you'd be reading so many posts and to me, you'd only have to ask that 'What ten percent?³⁰' question and I'd never read another post of yours again unless I wanted a good giggle. And just the way as I said earlier, the way people write. It's not how they write as in how good their academic language is or their language conventions: it's how they/ the depth that they go to and I don't want to work with somebody who's not prepared to go that additional mile. And then the lateness of the posts. I mean you can go through the discussion boards now and we're coming into week nine I think; and a little star will light up out the front of Science to say that there's new posts inside. You think OK I might have feedback so you go in and have a look. And it's somebody who's all of a sudden decided to contribute to week one, week two, week three, week four and week five. And you just think: 'What's the point now?' because the whole idea is for you to post early or within that week so that we can all feed off/well not feed off each other but discuss these things together. Well I can read yours and go "hey, hey that was great. I love that idea hadn't thought about that." Or, "no, bit of a bone of contention there". But if you're*

³⁰ This student highlighted her problem with students who hadn't read the unit outline and use the discussion board to find out what the assessment is worth.

not contributing: you're not growing as a person, but you're also stopping your peer from growing as well.

The strong ties between the corporeal and relational were evidenced here. The perceived slackness of peers was exposed through the words and lack of interaction and reciprocity. Images of peers were developed quickly and one error of communication made significant positive relationships difficult to develop. Mary had developed this pragmatic approach, or skill, to efficiently identify those peers who she believed were not interested in contributing, but rather receiving from others only and thereby holding the others back. Reciprocity was an indicator of the other's intention to develop a conversational relation. In the face-to-face context such apparently harsh, summary judgements may not be necessary. If made, the fact that there might be the possibility of interacting with this person from time to time might change the dynamic. However, online, each student controlled the ability to connect or disconnect. Once disconnected the gap was difficult to bridge. In the pragmatic distance online world participants viewed the ability to 'spot the dud' or more positively the ability to develop strong conversational relations with serious peers, as a skill to be cherished.

Relationality was not just specific interactions with peers in the online world. Students wanted to feel connected to tutors as well. Specifically for Tricia: *When you listen to a lecture and the lecturer constantly talks about what they are going to do in the tutorial which is absolutely nothing to do with me – hey look at all this stuff you don't get to do – that makes me think – well you're not even talking to me. You know, all of these comments are directed at someone who is on campus who can go to these tutorials and participate in these wonderful things. That makes me disengaged.*

Tricia's sense of alienation, brought about by a lack of connectedness with the tutor was magnified by technology, or at least the technology chosen and the way it was used. This is not merely a geographic distance about which she spoke. What she wanted to feel was an acknowledgement that she was a part of the interaction that was taking place. However, with the choice of technology and its use, almost the reverse was achieved. With technology in play, there was

always the opportunity for the connection to be lost in the moment. That is to say, the tutor was focussing on the classroom-based activity in such a manner as to force the remote *watchers* to sense their remoteness even more.

Technology did not impact on whether or not participants wanted or needed to communicate with a tutor; but rather how. Wanda had a framework within which she developed her relationship with her tutors. For her the relationship was clear. However, she acknowledged that some students took advantage of the range of technologies available for communicating with tutors because the technology options were available: *I got to know Cheryl and Rebecca and Trent³¹ through the engagement days and the orientation days, and I knew that if I did need anything they were there. And I knew that you could interact with them on the board and through feedback on your assignment, but that's, that was it. [...] You know and I know some people in the course, to me it bordered on stalking, they would always be phoning them or Skyping them or emailing them, this and that, and I think, God leave them alone. You know, there's three or four hundred people in a unit.*

The availability of technologies impacted the range of communication options. Also, in making it easier for contact, it potentially increased the quantity of contacts, if not the quality. It had an important impact on tutors, in particular, conscientious tutors. Some students understood the responsibilities increased range and speed of communications brought with it (Wanda and Connor's empathetic student earlier, for example), but as Wanda pointed out, some did not. Technologies may privilege different aspects of a relationship, through reducing transactional distance and increasing responsiveness, but there is a need to select tools appropriate to the context, student needs and tutor skills.

New technologies are disruptive and dislocating in this context. Rhonda's ability to access tutors at different times is appreciated by her, but the interpersonal space which she shares with the tutor on those occasions is qualitatively different from being able to meet in offices or face-to-face tutorials.

³¹ Cheryl, Rebecca and Trent were all course tutors who ran Engagement Days off-campus.

The positive impact of technology being used for filtering in online interactions was recognised and exemplified by Wanda: *Oh, from my perspective, because I'd probably say something horrendous it would be ... I just say it like it is. I can be a bit blunt, but um, in the online environment you are very aware that what you are saying is written and will stay there and it's just you know, a public forum. So that, that's sort of a bit good it's a bit of a buffer, makes you think about what you do say. You do have to be a bit more circumspect.*

She was aware of the different subtleties needed to develop relations with tutors and peers, but also of her expectation of others. It was easier online to be less forgiving, as avoiding someone online after confrontation or conflict created less personal stress than avoiding them in the classroom environment. Equally, relations that began within discussion boards migrated elsewhere if they become more personal. That technology impacted in a relational sense should not be surprising, given the important role of communication technology in the relations between students and students and tutors and the need for new skills development. What emerged throughout the interviews were the changes in meanings which occurred.

6.4 Conclusion

The impact of technology on participants and their perception of engagement was complex and more sophisticated than first anticipated. At a superficial level there were new skills to be developed and new ways of presenting learning materials. These were not the focus of this chapter.

Increasing complexity in technology may have improved flexibility of time and space, but with it came the increasing possibility of technological malfunction or of technological misunderstanding by tutors and students. Participants developed different meanings for time and space in their online context. The 'where' and 'when' of their study was less distinct and subject to greater manipulation by all participants.

In the same vein, technology impacted on the corporeal and relation experience of participants. New ways of meeting and understanding others and well as new ways of establishing and maintaining relationships needed to be found.

At another level, the online study being undertaken was related to a much deeper desire and search for meaningfulness. Becoming a teacher was still considered a vocation, a calling (as expressed by Bill) so the language, artefacts and rituals associated with it needed to be respectful of the higher calling. For participant students in this investigation, *LOL* did not pass muster. There were also negative impacts. To list two: bad technology design and implementation increased transactional distance between students and students and tutors. Technology failure created stress and disengagement.

It could have been easy to underestimate the energy, skill and determination which were needed for these participants to engage. Initially most of them looked to the physical world for understanding of their new environment. However, over the time of their study, many of them were developing the understanding and skills needed to facilitate a successful navigation of their online study space.

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You know when you're dealing with these students you've got to remember that at the other end of that post there's a person and they're an actual human person typing away at their computer and you've got to respect that and keep it in the back of your mind and so when you reply, you're replying to a person, not a message.

[Connor]

7.1 Introduction

Student engagement is not to be observed in a vacuum: it is contextually specific and evolving. For students new to the world of higher education, much of this contextualisation is revealed through the institution's culture, mores, regulations and protocols. Tutors, who are, at least in part, keepers and transmitters of institutional culture, mores, regulations and protocols, play a significant role in shaping the students' experience.

In addressing the third sub-question of the investigation: *How do tutor attitudes impact student engagement?*, this chapter turns to tutors' perceptions of engagement and their attitudes to technology, and how they might impact student engagement. I begin by outlining participant tutors' perceptions of student engagement with the aim of providing a perspective of the wide range of perceptions of student engagement which I found in the group of participating tutors. Later in the chapter, I examine tutor experiences, beliefs and pedagogies, and identify possible impacts of these on student engagement. All of these exist within the technologically mediated environment of distance online study.

7.2 Tutors' understandings of student engagement in a technologised environment

Over recent years, the Faculty of Education at University has focussed on student engagement as a significant issue in response to the literature linking higher levels of engagement with improved student learning outcomes. The need to engage students in their learning and professional

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development has been a central part of ongoing Faculty discussions (Pittaway, 2012). The institutionally nominated AUSSE had also been administered to Teacher Education students over a number of years. In spite of this level of activity in the Faculty, my research identified that tutors' understandings of engagement still varied as much as it did for students. As was the case for student interviews, tutors were provided the opportunity to provide their definitions or understandings of engagement early in their interview. While some participant tutors acknowledged the significance of their own role in student engagement, in general, they placed greater emphasis and the responsibility of being engaged onto the student. This section overviews and contextualises their initial responses.

In his response to the question about engagement for distance online students, James began by linking engagement directly to student communication and their active participation in learning activities which he as Unit Coordinator has developed: *well in the online environment, engagement to me is that students are actively undertaking the range of learning tasks that's structured into the unit; and actively communicating with other students in the unit and tutors; not just doing the assessment tasks*. His description emphasises student action, placing responsibility for their engagement with students. Whether it be academic activity or communication, the inference that can be drawn from his response is that he has provided the environment within which students can take the initiative to demonstrate engagement.

James also expressed his belief in a link between problems with engagement and attrition: *the dropout rate in this unit, and I think that there's a serious engagement problem in this Faculty, at the moment. Hence they've had to set up an Engagement/ Student Engagement Officer, because I think the dropout rate's quite high*. This perception resonates with the literature reviewed in Chapter Two which identified a link between lack of engagement and the probability of withdrawing from study.

The importance of student activity and involvement in the unit was also a key aspect of engagement for Albert. However, in his definition he focused on academic activity rather than communicating with others: *I've um translated that [engagement] into practice. Engagement for me is the degree to which the student passes the four critical questions every week in my unit*. Albert's pragmatic view

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of student engagement was represented in his unit's design in which he expected students' adherence to the established processes embedded in the unit. For Albert, student engagement focussed on their interaction with the content of the unit, to which he expected students spend specific amounts of time involving themselves. Albert understood, however, that this amount of time might not be the actual amount of time students engaged with the unit: *of course there's that tension between the lecturer who is making the assumption or making the explicit announcement at the beginning of the course; this will require 10 hours of engagement every week ... [and] the response from a student who is patently not doing the ten hours of engagement and not expecting to have to do that.* Albert measured engagement in hours spent in contact with the unit, capped off with students answering the *four critical questions*. As Albert described how the unit worked, he indicated that some latitude in the time was allowed for students to complete the *critical questions*. Successful completion of the critical questions was a pivotal component of the evidence of engagement. He made no reference to a Faculty position on, or definition of engagement; these were the only requirements he articulated for the student to demonstrate engagement.

Whilst neither Albert nor James had knowledge of the Faculty's position on student engagement, Charles indicated that he had thought through what it meant for his teaching practice. He emphasised that his own definition aligned or *resonated* with the Faculty's framework and was able to name each of its elements: *I haven't developed a strong view. Mine has been fairly simplistic, but I do resonate with the Faculty's engagement framework; [...] which involves intellectual, social, personal, academic and professional. They're the five.* He acknowledged that there was more to students being engaged than just interacting with the content; his definition of student engagement relied less on the process and unit content than on the students' attitudes and dispositions to learning: *So I can appreciate that, I suppose at a basic level I would understand engagement to be a sense of motivation to be involved and to be active in one's learning.*

Even with his, self-confessed simplistic view of engagement, Charles noted some important indicators of engagement for him:

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When students support each other, so that they begin to take the role of facilitator as well as the tutor does, so they have a shared sense of ownership of what's happening. So they might, even though I might be fairly quick most of the time to get in and respond to students' queries, um, peers might do it themselves. They might support each other, they might provide links to other materials for their assignments, I might notice that they um are exchanging emails or phone numbers or setting up study groups so that they're taking leadership, um that they're really taking ownership of the learning environment. And that to me is being engaged. So it's not just engaged with the content [...] that's what I would see as being evidence of real engagement.

Charles was encouraged by the fact that in his unit, engagement which might be summarised as involvement, interaction, reciprocity and connectedness, were student initiated and maintained. He also was more sanguine than James about where and how these activities happened: *I think that we would love to think that our students were getting together over coffee, or at each other's houses or online or through whatever means they can, and that what we're doing means something to their lives.* With involvement being one of the themes arising from student perceptions of engagement, some alignment with their understanding began to emerge for me.

In a similar manner to Charles, Connor interpreted engagement in terms of students' perceptions and interactions rather than their working according to unit and organisational structure and requirements or achieving particular learning outcomes. Connor was positive about a broader ranging student dialogue, that is, students communicating with each other and assisting each other in their studies: *Engagement is when they feel involved in what's going on. They feel connected, and I think when those two things happen, they're going to contribute and they're going to, hopefully, feel like what they contribute is valued.* As well as aligning with student themes of connectedness and involvement, Charles referred to the importance of reciprocity through hinting at a response to let students know that their effort is valued. He underlined this importance of connectedness and reciprocity through observing that: *one of the things that I found as I sort of progressed through this unit, this semester, was that um, they were really happy to chat to each other and help each other out.*

Emma's initial response to a question about indicators of student engagement was grounded in the context of the face-to-face environment and hence related primarily to the corporeal. When I sought clarification, specifically regarding the online experience, she replied:

Oh, well the obvious indicators I guess, although it doesn't necessarily mean so, but the overt indicators would be their engagement online. Whether or not they complete tasks when they're required. Whether or not they respond to other students online, because that's their virtual world and therefore those expectations are clearly laid out for them. So if they're not engaging in those things then one would assume that they're not engaging in learning. Otherwise they would be doing what was expected of them.

While Emma seemed to find it more difficult than the other tutors to describe engagement in an online environment, the position she took resonated somewhat with the understandings provided by James and Albert, as her construction focussed on students completing assigned tasks. She did, however, also incorporate aspects of engagement similar to those articulated by Charles and Connor; students communicating with their peers and responding in discussion groups; that is, doing what was expected and communicated through their unit materials. Student engagement online was indicated by compliance with the unit structure, processes and articulated unit expectations/requirements - *what was being expected of them.*

In a manner similar to students, tutors had varying perceptions of student engagement; some were more process and content-oriented, some more student and relationship-oriented. While diversity of opinion is neither inherently good nor bad, student participants distinguished between these orientations and associated them with the respective tutors they experienced during their studies.

7.3 Impacts on student engagement

While the Faculty has developed a considered and coherent position regarding student engagement and its impact on their approaches to learning and academic and professional development, the understanding of participant tutors of this position was neither ubiquitous nor comprehensive. Even

those tutors, who acknowledged the Faculty position, appeared to implement the framework in their unit in different ways. The nature of these attitudes to student engagement and how they impacted students and the complex relationships between tutor attitudes to engagement, technology and students was of interest to this investigation and are evidenced in the following eight examples.

7.3.1 Example 1: But where do the students play?

Charles noted that a number of the behaviours which he would associate with engagement were much more difficult to observe in his students studying online:

The problem we do have in the online environment is that we don't always see that, and so we don't always/ if we were to measure, if we were to try and measure that we may not be very objective. Because we don't know what is happening where and who and who's got study groups and how they relate with each other outside a class. And that's fine, we don't need to know. But, um, it's something we had to consider with the assessment of participation engagement in our units.

Whilst Charles was not advocating a need to control these groups, his concern related as to how these behaviours could be rewarded so that he could reinforce these relational activities as positive.

In discussing a similar topic James, took a different approach; for him the technology environment for learning and social activities are fully circumscribed by MyLO. In a manner reminiscent of an on-campus tutorial group, he was keen for students to segment their study world as is evidenced by his response to whether he knew of any informal groupings of students outside of MyLO:

Not really. And I don't encourage it. I encourage them to try and communicate/ my aim was to try and get, you know, a group of 14 or 15 to really engage with one another and to have some common tasks they all get involved in; and with their tutor, so there's a sort of a tightly knit and a good relationship established. But what I do find is that a lot of them go off into the social area and start chatting in there.

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While acknowledging that students *go off into the social area and start chatting in there*, James underscored the essential nature of his role as unit coordinator and students' participation in the unit's technological space in advising his students: *but don't ask course questions in here [social area], because your tutors aren't necessarily/ you know, direct your questions at the tutors.*

My interviews with participant students (Chapters Four & Five) revealed that it was not uncommon (a least with some participants) for students to develop their own groups outside the formal spaces provided in MyLO; that is, in spaces they constructed to align more closely to their needs and approaches and specific contexts. Rather than harnessing the relationality which students exhibited through communicating and developing relationships in other ways, in different spaces (and perhaps at different times), James for example, saw failure to participate in his defined space and ways, as a lack of engagement with the content and tutors: *But they/a lot of them will tend to gravitate there, because there tends to be more activity in there, because that has the whole class. They don't seem interested their groups.*

Ironically, James identified the issue; students make their own decisions about the way they want to engage and study. Technological changes both within and outside of MyLO have increased the options available to both students and tutors. James had responded to change in technology however, by trying to direct student activity back into the structures he had created. In these types of situations, and as evidenced in previous chapters, students found their own solutions. On the other hand, in his practice Charles looked to find ways of encouraging and rewarding students for taking the initiative and working with each other and even taking on a tutor facilitative role. Two such contrasting tutor attitudes to student engagement and its associated behaviours, demonstrates that students deal with differing complex situations within their course and individual units of study.

7.3.2 Example 2: Being human; being online

As well as differing understandings of student engagement, my analysis of tutor and student participant group data also revealed contrasting attitudes to technology both within and between them. As Feenberg (2002) pointed out, the argument regarding technology's power "to destroy the

dialogic relationship that ought to join teacher and student" (p.116) is as old as Plato and as new as the internet. An anecdote³² shared by Emma characterised this debate; it did so by questioning the possibility of encouraging students to have a rewarding identity online if you believed that you, as a tutor couldn't. Engagement for Emma was predominantly a corporeal phenomenon:

In fact, I'll share this with you because this might be interesting. One of my colleagues said to me yesterday that we should do/ we were having a meeting together to have a conversation around the content and she said: "I have to stop doing things online because it's killing my soul: because I'm a human being." That was a really nice way of putting it. She said, "I'm stopping this interaction online. Whenever I can, I'm going to meet with human beings, because it's actually killing my soul." That's what she said. So that's interesting, isn't it?

The emotive reference to *killing my soul* could be interpreted as a high degree of alienation when *doing things online*. It reflected her experience of the increased transactional distance from students: *that's their virtual world*. Emma's colleague expressed a preference for a more corporeal experience; one that she only felt in face-to-face meeting and communication, and was unable to move outside that perception of a learning experience. Technology in this context was experienced as an inhibitor to more fulfilling relations and communications – online teaching may have been necessary for distance students, but for the colleague, was experientially deficient.

While Emma endeavoured to improve her online practice through training and being more inclusive in the broadcast lectures, her attitude to technological mediation again evidenced the *add on nature* of distance online:

Um, well yeah, I think going back to what I was just saying, in terms of the face-to-face stuff, it's always like well I'm here speaking to you and this is an add-on for these people [distance online students]. They're there but they really aren't; and therefore it's not for them/we're doing the best for them, but this is what lecturing is and we're doing the best for you from a distance. That's the way I feel when I do that, and I make jokes and I always make sure that if

³² The online unit being discussed was a staff development activity for campus-based tutors.

someone asks a question, I say for those viewers at home, the question was da da da .. and I try and be mindful of that they're there, but I do feel like, oh, this is a big statement, but hopefully you'll understand what I mean by it: almost like they're second class citizens in that space.

As I related in Chapter Five, students such as Tricia experienced Emma's attitude of *those viewers at home*, as adding to their feeling of isolation and disengagement. Or as Wanda put it: *Oh, distance ed, here what do you think of this? Just write your answer. So we get a completely different question. And it was like, you care? We're the inconvenience – you know.* Tutors, through words and actions, impact students expectations and hence, their responses.

7.3.3 Example 3: Whose time?

It was unanimously agreed by participants in this investigation, both students and tutors, that the flexibility of study time provided through studying online, is one of the key positives for distance online students. That is to say for students, time takes on an increasingly personal meaning in terms of how it is deployed and what roles are associated with specific segments of time. With the increased variability in time and its use in the online space, and no formally scheduled synchronous meetings such as lectures and tutorials, issues of availabilities and windows for contact and responses need to be negotiated between students, and between students and tutors.

Albert perceived that he could develop more personal relationships with students through webinars³³, and hence put effort into their design:

The only times which I've specified as fixed for the online students have been the four webinars. I think they've been the Wednesday evenings between four and five. I've put them late in the day so that someone who's teaching in a school can finish their class, dash into an office and get onto the internet and participate in the webinar. So, I've tried to reduce the number of things which are fixed in time and place to be as few as possible.

³³ Webinars in this case were synchronous online 'meetings' using software which enabled two way audio for tutors and students plus broadcast visuals from tutors.

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He developed a considered rationale for his webinar scheduling; they could not be held during school time as students may have been working, or during his own on-campus teaching time. However, whether it was a time zone problem, work-time problem (for those not working in schools), or family pick-up responsibilities, students with existing commitments were unable to ‘attend’. With three children around the house, Rhonda found the time difficult: *A 4 o'clock web conference is completely useless. Four to six with three kids under five is a mad couple of hours. There's no chance of sitting down for two hours and listening to a web conference; and they say "Oh that's fine, we provide the recordings". But you lose that interaction; again, you're just listening to someone's voice not feeling included.* For distance online students and tutors, time lost its objectivity and became personal. Decisions made on the basis of a personal view of time, impacted others' personal time resulting in unintended consequences.

7.3.4 Example 4: Asynchronicity

Some participants acknowledged that having more control over time and its use enabled them to modify their contribution to online discussions. For example Connor, with his interest in literacy, was conscious of the way in which online discussions became a textual artefact:

Indeed. Part of that too I think also is this: is getting back to this thing about time. It's synchronicity. When you're in the classroom, you're in the moment, and it's happening and the discussion's there. And someone said something and: "Oh, I've got an opinion on that or I've got something to say about that, blah, blah, blah." In MyLO, for example, if you read a discussion post today, you don't need to reply today. You can go away and think about it or read something or get someone else's opinion. And then come back two days later and say: "Huh, a masterpiece!"

Connor's use of the term, *you're in the moment* is important and represents a key difference in perceptions about studying face-to-face and online.

Geraldine perceived the spontaneity of a tutorial room as *bouncing ideas off one another* which both she and most other participants envisaged as a positive of studying on-campus. However, the pressures of time in such tutorial sessions, results in only a brief opportunity to respond in meaningful ways; once that opportunity passes, it does not return. The moment is set by what

happens around it and the discussion may have moved on before everyone has the chance to make a contribution. However, in the online space, responses are not rushed by the speed and rhythm of conversation or discussion, and as a result some students make their contribution more reflective and insightful. Whilst the moment to which Connor referred impacted both student and tutor contributions, the time of the asynchronous discussion board is more flexible and passes some control to the individual.

The discussion board becomes an important communication tool in online learning but tutor management of interaction in this space varied, and students commented on how different approaches affected them. Tricia, for example, contrasted her perceptions of response time in two different units of study; in one unit she explained: *If I put a question on to the discussion board five minutes and someone has answered me or tried to help me. Everyone is so helpful. I really feel very much part of a community on line in that respect.* However, in another unit where she believed expectations were not well managed, she experienced a quite different response time: *Maybe, maybe the ability to be engaged is the ability to need something and have that need met; um when you need it met. Maybe 'cause I feel like [laugh] I need something it's days before my need is met, if at all.* The different tutors' attitudes to online discussion and how it is managed had a considerable impact on the way Tricia engaged online; this was not a technical skill issue, but a pedagogical skill issue.

7.3.5 Example 5: Perceptions of tutor availability online

The responses of student participants indicated that their image of tutors was impacted by how tutors used the technology. As Tricia related, she felt alienated by the perceived lack of timely reciprocity on discussion boards; whilst conversely, Mary stated that she believed that some tutors spent all of their time online. Even taking into account some hyperbole on Mary's part, it is still worthwhile noting that her perception of the time the tutor spent online was for her an indicator of reciprocity, which impacted her engagement: *Now some of the tutors will: some of them, I'm sure that they live on the boards as well because every time somebody puts a post, you can be guaranteed that they're gonna respond to that post and they're gonna treat it knowing that that is your window to that tutorial group.* Mary perceived

that a tutor was online because of the relative immediacy of feedback which s/he provided and the ability of MyLO to indicate who is online. Whilst the positive image of the tutor being available may have been an artefact of the technology; for Mary the responsiveness of her tutor was important.

Charles, Albert and Connor all indicated that from time to time they kept MyLO running in the back ground while doing other work and checked in every so often to see what was happening, as Charles described: *The other thing that's important to me is that there's frequent/ that there's quick responses. So that I would tend, rather than devote a day to being online, I would, um, hover online and maybe have my MyLO page open while I'm writing other things and if a new post comes up, I just grab it quickly and then keep going on with my work.* They were technically online, paying attention to what was happening all of the time, but not necessarily engaged. By the simple act of being logged on while doing other work on the computer, student perceptions were impacted.

7.3.6 Example 6: Empathy online

In the mediated relationality of the online environment, where I had expected more pragmatic transactional communication to be the norm, my investigation identified a number of examples of empathy being displayed as a result of tutors' attitudes to their students and their understanding of their role. In this anecdote, Connor relates how students empathised, not just with peers, but with him in response to his efforts to respond quickly and fully to their discussion board contributions:

... and it was interesting too, because when I first started back in weeks two and three, I was checking MyLO every day and I was spending hours of a night, you know, going through, replying to all the discussion posts and making sure, and at one point, [laugh] bless her, one of the students said [on the discussion board] "Connor, stop it's OK. We know you're there. We know we can contact you. You need to have a break as well. Right, we don't expect you to read every single little word that we post."

Connor's attitude to his tutoring was observed by students and had a positive effect on the way in which they engaged with him and the unit. His revelation to his students through his actions online had elicited an empathetic response which he shared:

I thought it was lovely. You know, because I just had this compulsion: oh God, if they have written something, I've just go to check it. I've got to make sure it ... And um, so she was really nice about it and she sort of said: "look, you clearly haven't got time if you teach on campus as well, and you're young [I've got young kids and all the rest of it] you don't have time to do this/ or sustain this level of focus, so, just take a breath and check it just once or twice a week, it'll be OK, we won't hold it against you." So that was, you know, that was just a bit of a reminder to me to step back a bit and give it a bit of perspective. And so I learned from that.

The community environment which was sustained by Connor provided the freedom for the student to transcend her *self* (in van Manen's, 1990, sense). She was willing to take a risk and communicate with Connor, in a calculatedly light manner, to make a point to benefit him, not herself or fellow students, thus demonstrating *soul* online. MyLO as a technology did not privilege the student's response: in fact text-based discussion groups militate against such displays of empathy. In a non-verbal, clue-starved environment³⁴ the student showed perception and sensitivity to notice that Connor was being overzealous with his responses. Then to take the time to let him know in a non-threatening manner demonstrated high level online skills. That her response was in the discussion group space also spoke to the strong sense of community that had been created by the tutor.

Engagement with a community where vulnerability was openly admitted was a statement of confidence in peers, tutors and teaching space indicating a supportive and responsive environment. This example underscores the potential for an element of openness in engagement online where tutors take time to develop communities where the emotional aspect of relations is normalised.

7.3.7 Example 7: Online design and tutoring

The nature of the technical design of LMS used in Australian higher education is to maximise the design (graphic and instructional) freedom, however, the use of increasingly sophisticated technologies has not, in itself guaranteed increasingly sophisticated and creative instructional and

³⁴ notwithstanding emoticons! ;)

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graphic design. As many of my participant tutors were also unit designers, they had the opportunity to align their unit design with their preferred pedagogy.

For Albert, his online design was built on pedagogy based on his face-to-face teaching experience:

.... the activities they're asked to do in the tutorials were exactly the same as the ones which were given to the students here. So, in that respect, my pedagogy wasn't that dramatically different, but it did give those students who are learning from a distance the opportunity to learn at night, work during the day.

His desire to reproduce the classroom experience online meant that he chose equity of input and process for all of his students. Emma, on the other hand recognised that her pedagogy needed to be adapted to take advantage of the online environment and reduce the perceived negative impacts of continuing to use on-campus approaches. Her focus was equity of outcomes: *Obviously [giving] lectures online is different to face-to-face and I'm already reflecting on, well, why do it differently? And I can see why it's done differently; because it meets different needs; and there are different needs.*

As already discussed, the online space does not have the physical boundaries of the classroom, and hence is more complex; it was *in there, on the kitchen table, a link, out there*. Learning online meant different things to different people and felt different to those involved. This variability of experience is key to the possibility of complexity and sophistication of design. Emma, for example, explained how the use of technology was causing her to change her communication approach:

'What adjustments do I make?' [pause] um, I try and I've started to try and change the way I write online to students. So, traditionally if I was writing, I'd go back into that formal approach to what I was saying, whereas, now I use a much more colloquial type approach in what I'm saying. Less formal in the written sense, does that make sense? Um, to try and engage students to be more personable.

Both her attitude and her approach had changed as a result of her seeing the possible new meanings of technology for distance online students. Emma had begun to understand the difference between

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the formality of purely academic writing and the more personable, informal approach that is possible on the discussion boards and when communicating directly with students. Making this connection with the students was for her a first step in understanding the changing nature of language online and the possibility of new communication processes and protocols.

For Albert too, his perceptions of the use of technology in online study, also had a significant impact on his unit design. Having been an early adopter of computing technology, his design was based in a behaviourist approach of weekly reading and activities, culminating in a test (which he called *critical questions*) for which successful completion was required before the student was able to move onto the next unit section. Albert used the design of his unit to share his pedagogical preferences for online teaching with his students:

It's very interesting you say that because one of the bits of teaching I've done with this group is to have a week where we talked about teaching online. And I prepared for all of the students a sandbox unit in MyLO so that they had the experience of taking on my role and trying to prepare a course, just a couple of lessons, for online delivery of a course themselves. And, as part of that, I asked them to prepare a quiz; and we went through the process of preparing a quiz and I said: "well look, you put the question at the top and you put the five possible answers below" [...] In that respect and it was lovely to hear the comments from the students saying: "gee, I never realised that teaching online was that difficult. I begin to appreciate what you're doing for us now." [laugh] So when you say: "it's a big investment of my time." I think it's worth it. [...]

And as you say, I'm identifying the precise point where the student needs a bit of extra help.

Albert used his unit to tutor his students in course design, a design based on his preferred view of technology. In this instance, his attitudes were being transferred to his students representing quite a direct impact of tutor pedagogies.

By contrast, Charles looked more to improving his communication online through his unit design and technology use:

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Well I do think that people like personal contact. Um, so in my lectures, they're not actually lectures, they're interviews. People see me and another, this is in the units that I co-ordinate, um, talking as we might in an interview, but around the content, so that they're seeing me, as their teacher, in that sense, and they're seeing another professional, and they're engaging in a dialogue. So, it helps with their social engagement, if you want to put it that way, in relation to the framework, and their professional engagement. And I find/ the feedback has been that particularly online students, really like being able to see faces.

Charles' design reflects his preference for focussing on student engagement. He enhances the corporeal experience provided to students through the use of video. Gathering evidence of student preferences enabled him to further develop his unit and tutoring skills and approaches to better meet students' needs.

James was keen to encourage students to work independently and then engage with each other as part of their reflective practice, and did so by following an activity-based approach; a strategy which he used successfully in his face-to-face classes:

I guess the thing is, what you have to try and rely on to try and do it this way is to get/that's why engagement is such an important factor; is to encourage them to have a go at the activities, reflect on what they've done; discuss that with others and then we go onto the next phase of the thing. And that's how I've tried to structure the unit, from a more, I guess, they need to work independently, but also try to get them to bring their, you know what they do, the various activities I get them to do: like I can do an activity down here in the classroom, we all do it and talk about it, but I give them some activities, they either do them at home, and then they've got to recap with someone else and try and talk about what they've learned and share their ideas. [...]

But, as I say, you've got no control over it. You can't force them to do it, you can only encourage them and you can say how this connects with the assessment.

In translating his pedagogy into the online environment he was unable to take into account the transactional distance between himself and his students which led to his perceived lack of *control over it* and his inability to force them to do it.

In their own ways James, Albert and Emma were endeavouring to discover and develop ways in which their preferred pedagogies could be translated into the online environment, while Connor and Charles were more open to transmuting their pedagogies to fit new environments. Tutors' attitudes to technology set parameters in the way they designed and implemented units online which in turn impacted student engagement.

7.3.8 Example 8: Perceptions of students' technology skills

Perceptions of student skills in using technology strongly influenced tutor approaches to online teaching and unit design. When asked about student online skills, tutors' responses focussed mainly on the technical, believing for the most part, that students' online skills were variable, with younger students perceived generally as more ICT literate. However, they did not refer to any empirical evidence upon which they based their opinions. Emma's comment reflected her perception that tutors may be making unfounded assumptions about the skill levels of students:

I think that generally we make assumptions that the Y generation or whatever generation we're up to now, have this competency, [...] I was talking to the IT support people here and she said that she was amazed at the range of people who had more skills than she did, down to people who/she said: "they even made you look good" [laugh]. "Thanks for that!" So I do think that there's a huge range and I think we do make an assumption about their capacity and their experience.

Emma also recognised that the level of skill that students brought to their study online had an impact upon their engagement:

Well it has to impact, just purely on the way they manage their way around the computer system. [...] And they are skills that I think they need to have and we need to /well I think if we're going to be really supportive and make sure that they maintain engagement then it is

partly our responsibility to make sure that we incorporate a space for them to be able to learn the skills that they need.

She wasn't sure how their IT skill level might impact their learning and engagement, but was sure that it did. These attitudes and beliefs were important to her tutoring approaches. Whilst she felt positive that the institution accepted its responsibility of ensuring all students had a minimum level of competence online, she seemed less concerned about online protocols and netiquette.

Connor was much more positive about student technical skills and raised online writing/literacy skills as an issue for students, noting that some students had mastered some useful work processes to reduce bad spelling and grammar, while improving their arguments by pre-writing and cutting and pasting to the discussion boards. When asked how confident he thought students were with technology he related a story about a technical malfunction in MyLO: *It varies [...] some of them were savvy with that and were confident with it and some of them had no idea whatsoever and they freaked out if they posted this half page discussion thing and it was all neatly organised in paragraphs and they put it in MyLO and psst! Just a big block chunk of writing and "Oh no!"* He felt that the majority of his students were very capable and that experiencing technological issues caused frustration rather than reduced confidence:

Oh, I don't think there's a confidence issue there. I think it's a frustration thing obviously. That's the main thing. Because you want to be able to control what you're doing; what you're saying particularly. And it's more of a sense of that, rather than, oh, I'm clearly shit at this. I'm not going to bother any more. Because by and large I would say that the majority of the students are really very capable. They are very articulate.

The perceptions articulated by these two tutors about the importance of student ICT skills on their engagement, were reiterated by other tutors with some minor variation. In the main, participating tutors perceived that student skills were at least as good as their own, with a few exceptions, and operated on this basis, and perceived high levels of social media use in students (particularly younger students) as the basis of their design and tutoring. As there is little research as

to the level of student ICT skills in Australian higher education (Eijkman & Herrmann, 2009), tutors engage in online education design and practice in somewhat of a knowledge vacuum.

7.4 Conclusion

Tutors are a critical part of distance online students' experience of higher education as they provide one of the few contact points the students have with the university. Tutors participating in this investigation varied both in the way in which they perceived student engagement and viewed technology and its use in distance online education. Generally, tutors perceived that the online environment (MyLO) brought with it limitations and opportunities for them in implementing their pedagogies. Temporal, spatial, corporeal and relational limitations of online study were identified by the tutors, some of whom indicated that they felt that the new skill sets needed for tutoring online were technical rather than pedagogical. Other tutors saw pedagogical opportunities in technologies and the potential to help students become more engaged.

In the second part of this chapter I highlighted examples of tutor attitudes to student engagement and/or technology mediated experiences which directly impact student engagement. In the manner in which tutors teach and in some cases design their unit, they implement their pedagogical beliefs and attitudes and as a result, students were presented with a wide range of experiences online. I argue that each of these examples indicate the manner in which tutors' approaches to teaching online impact student engagement in different ways, both positively and negatively.

Chapter Eight: Review, Contributions and Conclusions

In a modern context, it is also a highly technologized experience: we are operated on by a whole panoply of devices. From the user of tools we become the object of tools. [Feenberg, 2004, p. 103]

8.1 Introduction

This investigation made two significant contributions to research on student engagement. Firstly: the identification of themes which provide a new way of understanding student engagement, from a student perspective. Secondly: it identified critical issues which challenge current thinking about student engagement, specifically as they manifest in distance online students.

My research aimed to answer questions focussed on a neglected aspect of student engagement: the perceptions of initial teacher education, distance students with regard to their engagement through their online studies. This chapter reviews the themes arising from students' perceptions of their engagement, highlights the contribution which these themes make to an improved understanding of student engagement, and reflects on possibilities for further study. In doing so, it creates new alignments in the understanding of the relationships between student engagement, technology and tutor perceptions, specifically as they apply to distance students online (which, as was shown in Chapter Two, rarely have been addressed in the literature). Thus, linking the findings of this investigation directly to existing literature either for confirmation, differentiation or generalisation misses the point and serves to dilute or even discount the participant voice rather than justify it. For example, while the issue of the difference in understanding of engagement between tutors and students has been previously reported (Heller, Beil, Dam and Haerum (2010); van der Velden (2013); and Kahu (2013)), that fact is not needed to legitimise the student experience reported in this investigation.

Focussing on student voices to understand their perceptions placed this investigation apart from the usual focus on factors related to student academic success and progress or attrition. With

tutors and technology being significant actors in the phenomenon of engagement, their role in student engagement was also addressed.

In rounding out the dissertation this chapter will do four things:

- broadly review the investigation;
- highlight contributions to research on student engagement;
- identify opportunities for further research; and
- reflect on what I have learned.

8.2 Review

Whoever wants to become acquainted with the world of teachers, mothers, fathers, and children should listen to the language spoken by the things of their lifeworlds, to what things mean in this world. (van Manen, 1990, p. 112)

The investigation originated in my interest from resolving the differences between what I had heard from distance online students and their tutors in my professional roles, and the research literature I had read. Research to date had underpinned significant progress in the understanding of student engagement, through the development of frameworks and identifying factors, dimensions and elements that characterise engagement, particularly as it impacts student learning outcomes. However, this told only part of the engagement story; a lack of student voices in the research literature provided an opportunity to fill this significant gap. Through participation in a semi-structured interview process nine students and five tutors provided their perceptions of engagement within a distance online environment. Through discussion and stories, the participants focussed on their experiences of student engagement through their online study and how peers, tutors and technology impacted those experiences.

The research questions which focussed this investigation were:

What are initial teacher education students' perceptions of engagement as they study online in the distance mode?

More specifically, within this context, this investigation responded to the following sub-questions:

- *What do students understand of their experiences of engagement?*
- *In what ways do educational technologies impact student engagement?*
- *How do tutor attitudes impact student engagement?*

The investigation followed van Manen's (1990) approach to researching the lived experience.

Data generated through the semi-structured interviews were analysed within van Manen's hermeneutic phenomenological framework of four existentials: temporality (lived time), spatiality (lived space), corporeality (lived body) and relationality (lived relations), in order to uncover meanings of these perceptions. When research into student engagement shifts focus from learning outcomes and institutionally-oriented policy development, to listening to students' perceptions and experiences, a different view of engagement emerges.

This view of engagement is unique to each participant and in as much as the themes which arose from our discussions highlight the possibility of these themes being shared more broadly, some readers may choose to reflect whether they apply to their environment. Should they resonate with their experience and the experience of others then sharing these insights will have had a positive effect.

8.3 Contribution to research on student engagement

8.3.1 Finding one

Distance online students in this investigation understood their engagement with study in an alternate and unique way which was I have aggregated into seven themes.

Although participants did not articulate a formal, developed definition of engagement, they held understandings of engagement which were based on personal experiences unique to their respective lifeworlds. However, even in this uniqueness, there were similarities. I developed seven themes from the data, which highlight the manner in which student engagement was perceived by my

participants. These themes should not to be confused with factors, indicators or elements that form part of a definition of engagement, as not all themes applied to all students at all times. As such, they are not intended to form the basis for predictions about improving student learning outcomes, rather they provide an alternate, student-centred way of structuring an understanding of engagement specifically as it applies to distance online students. These themes are:

Connectedness

This theme was the most significant for students, and the one most often raised in relation to their understanding of engagement (see also Feenberg 2002 and Friesen & Kuskis, 2012). It was the sense in which they felt that they were part of what was happening. At its core were the relationships that developed within the time, space and relations of studying. There was an expressed desire that these relations could be initiated and maintained in a face-to-face environment, but it was accepted that this would not happen easily, and that the environment in which the student participants were operating still offered some alternatives to be exploited.

Reciprocity

To feel engaged, all of the student participants looked for responses from those with whom they interacted. While a timely response was preferred, it was the relevance (as judged by the student) and personalisation of the response that was identified as most important. Participants struggled with the fact that perceptions of time in the distance online environment were different from the perceived immediacy of those of the face-to-face world.

Involvement

Participants, who expressed a desire to feel involved in their studies shared, at least in part, definitions to be found in the literature of involvement (Astin, 1984) and intellectual engagement (Pittaway, 2012), in regard to academic (pedagogic) activities, time spent in (productive) study, and questioning. However, by virtue of their increased transactional

distance from campus, other aspects of Astin's definition such as community and socially-oriented on-campus activities outside of class, were not relevant to them, and for some, outside of their understanding.

Routine

All participants identified problems with conflicting demands on their time. For the most part, to manage their time effectively, they developed routines. These routines were at three levels: annually, weekly and daily. There were also the routines of study periods: times and processes; how they structured the time available to them for study; and the routine time sequence of actions when they went online. There was a recognition that time to study needed to be extracted from daily life and used in consistent ways in order to feel engaged with their study and to gain maximum return.

Pragmatism

To some extent, the theme of pragmatism was also a time related issue. The student participants (who were all successfully progressing through their study programs) were success-oriented; that is to say, they wanted to complete their course in the minimum time, while still achieving good results. Students were reluctant to be a part of any activities that did not align with these goals, hence, they eschewed any busy-work designed into a unit. Antipathy to perceived time-wasting and time-wasters was expressed by all of the student participants: particularly in regards younger students whom they perceived to be more interested in discussing social activities, or in regards anyone whom they judged to be trying to do as little work as possible and therefore *not pulling their weight*.

They responded in a practical (pragmatic) manner to situations which presented themselves rather than developing and conducting a considered campaign in approaching

their studies³⁵. Being able to apply what was being learned to their professional development was also important to feeling engaged, as was bringing any relevant experience to bear on their studies.

Online Image

I have used this term in both a corporeal and relational sense. In order to establish and develop relations online with people with whom they could engage, participants felt it necessary to develop an image (particularly online) through which to present themselves. The images which they perceived of others online (an online lived body) were used as a basis for making judgements. These images might be textual, graphic or photographic, but were more often developed from textual contributions in discussion groups and general online interactions (or non-interactions).

Online Identity

As outlined in Chapter Two, identity had a range of meanings: for example, personal, professional or academic identity(ies). My specific interest in this investigation was in regard to how the participants saw themselves as online students and how this impacted their sense of engagement. As they progressed through their course, participants endeavoured to develop a sense of themselves as students (at a distance, online) when the environment in which they lived and worked may not have supported this view. Their sense of engagement appeared to increase as they began to see themselves as students, and their study as legitimate academic activities and processes. Their identity was also impacted by their perceptions of how others saw them and related to them.

Taken together, these themes provide an alternative way of understanding the context in which distance online students perceive engagement. While recognisably related to a number of frameworks outlined in the literature, they have been represented in this manner as this is a reflection of how they

³⁵ Thus, I have interpreted their responses as based in an innate practically rather than a formally learned range of meta-cognitive skills such as strategic learning as part of scaffolding in a computer-based environment (Azevedo & Hadwin, 2005).

were articulated by participants. The significant difference from existing literature is the student focus on social and affective contextual issues.

8.3.2 Finding Two

Participant students were creative, yet pragmatic in the manner in which they embodied technology to enrich their study experience and engagement.

While technology is often viewed as an impediment to student engagement because of its potentially disembodied nature (see discussion p. 135 & p. 172), participant students were creative yet pragmatic in the ways they embodied technology and used it to enrich their study experience and engagement. This investigation focused on technology in its relational role with humans. The benefit of this approach came from contextualising technology in its human relation rather than objectifying it as an artefact. Within this investigation technology was understood only in so far as it could be embodied. The impact of a technology was only important within the context of its relational use by an individual.

Researching technology as objective artefacts may be interesting, but could only speak to technology as facilitating or impeding engagement, not as to how students and tutors used it to enhance engagement. Whether taking a position from a critical theory (Feenberg, 2004) or hermeneutic phenomenology (Ihde, 1990, 2001), my focus was on students engaging through technology as an extension of the individual, rather than engaging with technology.

The creative use of technology as an extension of themselves enabled participant students to build their own communities outside of MyLO to enrich their study experience. In investigating this phenomenon, gave rise to two further issues for consideration:

Community and communication

Online communities have been studied closely in relation to their role in learning (Garrison, 2007) with their essential elements being described “mutual interdependence among members, connectedness, trust, interactivity, and shared values and goals” (Rovai, 2002, p. 321). Evidence from this investigation indicated that while the tutors may try to create a community in Garrison’s sense, students were more focussed on engaging with specific elements of community which met their immediate needs: connectedness rather than interdependence, and shared values and goals; similarly, interactivity (as seen in reciprocity and involvement) rather than developing trust.

Clarity of communication, contribution to the pool of knowledge, and accessing knowledge and skills shared by others were highlighted by student participants as benefits of being connected. While these have been identified as elements of online communities, their mere existence did not mean that there was a community in place. In fact, the difficulties which students found in establishing and/or maintaining (for those groups established by tutors) collaborative online learning groups (communities) were mentioned by all participants. The pragmatics and isolation of studying at a distance in the online context, created for students a paradox of working as an individual in a group (sometimes under sufferance). Endeavouring to force students to engage with peers through structured or unstructured online communities could be argued theoretically but was not empirically supported by this investigation.

Limitations to the usefulness of Learning Analytics in measuring engagement

As outlined in Chapter Two, the increased generation and availability of data from sophisticated LMS has led to an interest in mining those data to develop understandings of students’ approaches to learning and engagement with an aim of improving teaching and learning strategies outcomes. A basic assumption underpinning such an approach is that the majority of information regarding how students study online is available through data mining the LMS. From analysing the vast quantity

and array of data held within the LMS, it has been argued that overall patterns to determine approaches to successful learning could be developed and validated.

Significantly, this investigation has evidenced that student participants tended to use the LMS as best suited their needs at a particular time, and that they used a range of other available technologies as the opportunities and needs presented themselves. Hence my research provides a cautionary tale in that the picture of student use and approach built up through data mining/analytics, may not be fully representative of the students' study activities and thus provide a false view of student 'engagement'.

8.3.3 Finding Three

Unlike participant students, participant tutors perceived student engagement primarily in terms of student learning and content.

An understanding of engagement was not shared between participant students and participant tutors. While tutors were influential in students experiencing a sense of engagement, for the most part tutors viewed engagement through a different lens which was a part of a more complex relationship.

Student and tutor views of engagement are part of a complex relationship

Relationality is critical in encouraging engagement. Implicit in the research questions on which this investigation was based, was an assumption that there was a relationship between tutor attitudes and actions and students' perceptions of engagement; and between tutor and student views of technology.

[Before reflecting on these issues I reiterate that there was no specific relationship between the students and tutors who participated in this investigation. While it may be assumed that students might have worked with some of the tutors at some stage, that relationship was neither central nor necessary to any analysis.]

The quality of the design (particularly organisation) of the units, and the ICT skill of the tutors were identified by tutors as being important in stimulating student engagement. However, for the most part, those were not the critical issues raised by participating students. Instead, students mentioned the importance of tutors helping students feel connected and involved, and responding in meaningful ways to students' contacts and contributions, as being important to maintaining engagement. Conversely students highlighted through the examples they provided, that tutors could have a negative impact on their engagement within a specific unit by not reciprocating engagement with students, particularly where expectations were created and not met.

Students realised that tutors were individuals and therefore tailored their responses to the circumstances of each tutor and unit, highlighting in their interviews how they engaged differently with different tutors. Students discriminated between tutors and were able to separate negative or positive experiences with specific tutors, so that they did not impact their engagement with other tutors. However, previous experiences with a particular tutor did impact their expectation of engagement in future units with that tutor.

Participant students, in general, had developed their ICT skills more broadly, and were tolerant of lower level tutor ICT skills providing any lack of skill did not impinge on students' online study. Students did not expect that tutors had the skills to be an ICT help desk.

8.4 Opportunities for further research

In heading this section 'Opportunities for further research', I am aware of the fact that, as in all areas of endeavour, the more that is learned, the more questions are raised. This investigation was no different and a number of directions for further study have arisen from it; some of which are practical and others theoretical. They include:

- Improving the understanding of elements of reciprocity
 - The importance of reciprocity to participant students was clear, however, more study needs to be undertaken into its form. There are important practical issues involved, for example: while students anticipate informed, cordial and timely responses, they

are aware that tutors cannot be available all of the time. Research into what the parameters of student expectations are, so that they can be effectively managed by institutions and tutors would improve student engagement without unnecessarily increasing tutor workload.

- Broadening the qualitative study of engagement to other groups of students and tutors
 - The reliance on quantitative studies into student engagement could be enhanced through qualitative studies of other sub-groups of higher education cohorts. This investigation revealed individual differences between participants with regard to their perceptions of engagement as well as perceptions which are peculiar to distance online study. These findings suggest that the same could be true for other higher education (or perhaps Foundation-12) sub-groups which should be investigated to better target those populations.
- Developing a better understanding of online image and online identity as it applies to students
 - With the increasing use of social media, a case can be made for students developing multiple identities and images corresponding to different online environments. More work is required to understand how students establish and maintain these online images and identities and their impact, particularly with respect to online study. For example, what is the impact of peers (or tutors) using graphics or images of animals as their identifying photographs on their own image and more importantly, on their relations with others?
- Understanding mechanisms for developing greater feelings of connectedness between students and between students and tutors
 - There currently exists an expectation that higher quality student engagement improves learning outcomes. Hence, the demonstrated importance of connectedness to engagement, and evidence that tutor engagement impacts student engagement in

this investigation, points to further research into understanding how the level and quality of student/peer/tutor connectedness can be managed and improved.

- Research is required to articulate a clear understanding of the various student and tutor views of academic attitudes and behaviours and how they can be changed to reduce the possibility of tensions.
 - This investigation evidenced tensions between student and tutor views of academic attitudes and behaviours in online study. The problem may be particularly pertinent to mature age, distance online students who come to higher education without having been fully socialised into the (an) academic milieu. For example: a broader/deeper understanding of ‘lurking’ would enable tutors to better respond to students online who might be perceived as not engaged because they don’t respond to the online study in an ‘expected’ manner; or: for both tutors and students there was evidenced a fuzziness in understanding the differences between formal and informal text. Further research might focus on understanding these differences in online study so as to reduce tensions and improve communication.

8.5 Conclusion: engagement, technology and tutors – a potent mix for improving the experience of distance online students

Through extending the conversation regarding the understanding of engagement, from a focus on measurement, metrics and improved learning outcomes, this investigation moved towards realising the rhetoric of lifelong learning, in making learning a continuing and enjoyable experience for learners. Investigations such as this are not just an intellectual investment; they are also a social and emotional investment.

A number of the assumptions and prejudices regarding distance online students and tutors, which I brought to this work were challenged, others were verified. The distance online students with whom I spoke were committed to their study, their family, their peers, their current work and their future profession. At the same time, the tutors with whom I spoke were reflective and skilled in their teaching. In some cases whilst I may question the pedagogies they employed, their concern for, and commitment to their students was unquestionable.

The technology which is their extension into other worlds is becoming increasingly sophisticated and more widely available. Understanding its importance and the impact it has on student (and tutor) engagement is critical if higher education is to avoid playing an expensive game of 'catch up' with technology with technologists leading the pack.

For participant students, engagement as a term was more often than not detached from the concept of learning outcomes but related to their experience of, and feelings towards their study. From an analysis of the data, what became clear was that while there were identifiable themes regarding the meanings participants attributed to engagement, each participant expressed these in ways unique to themselves and their contexts.

The themes are an *alternative* and *unique* way of understanding student engagement in distance online study. *Alternative*, in that in hearing a student perspective, differences were identified distinguishing students' perceptions from institutional and research views of student engagement. *Unique*, in that the richness of student and tutor responses was celebrated while maintaining a sensitivity to the themes which provided insights into the students' worlds. As the themes evidenced, students' engagement was closely aligned to affective/conversational relations with peers, tutors, content, family, friends, the profession, the institution and students' perceptions of their own embodiment in an online environment.

These themes, while not unrelated to the research literature, were not exactly the same either. In general, participants' perceptions of engagement were much more pragmatic (in Ihde's terms citing Kant) than those suggested in the literature. While this was unsurprising, as the participants

themselves displayed all the hallmarks of pragmatists, this was a feature/characteristic not widely referred to in the literature.

I also learned that engagement was not fixed in time and space, but was a personal experience that changed according to time and circumstances. It was not limited to learning outcomes, although academic success increased motivation and therefore had a positive impact on engagement.

The complexity of the relationship between students, peers, tutors and technology cannot be underestimated. Thinking of technology as inert misses the point. Whilst it may be backgrounded by other environmental factors becoming virtually invisible, this invisibility does not impede its role in being an extension of an individual.

8.5.1 And finally

Distance online students, particularly those of mature age, exhibit courage. Like Rita, they embark on a trail into a new land - a land with language and culture different from their home country. Often, all they can take with them on this journey are their experiences and aspirations. On the way they draw on their experience to help them make sense of what confronts them, and they take what they learn so that they can apply it to other contexts. They also acquire artefacts and meet others, those on the journey with them and those who have trodden the path before and who are now their guides. Their willingness and ability to take the risk, sometimes against considerable odds, is ultimately the evidence of their engagement.

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Appendix 1

Ethics Approval

Social Science Ethics Officer
Private Bag 01 Hobart
Tasmania 7001 Australia
Tel: (03) 6226 1832
Fax: (03) 6226 7148
Marilyn.pugsley@utas.edu.au



HUMAN RESEARCH ETHICS COMMITTEE (TASMANIA) NETWORK

06 April 2011

Dr Sharon Pittaway
Education
Private Bag 1307
Launceston Tasmania

Dear Dr Pittaway

Re: MINIMAL RISK ETHICS APPLICATION APPROVAL

Ethics Ref: H0011690 - The impact of the use of technology on student and staff engagement within the context of fully online, distance pre-service teacher education at the University of Tasmania.

We are pleased to advise that acting on a mandate from the Tasmania Social Sciences HREC, the Chair of the committee considered and approved the above project on 06 April 2011.

Please note that this approval is for four years and is conditional upon receipt of an annual Progress Report. Ethics approval for this project will lapse if a Progress Report is not submitted.

The following conditions apply to this approval. Failure to abide by these conditions may result in suspension or discontinuation of approval.

1. It is the responsibility of the Chief Investigator to ensure that all investigators are aware of the terms of approval, to ensure the project is conducted as approved by the Ethics Committee, and to notify the Committee if any investigators are added to, or cease involvement with, the project.
2. Complaints: If any complaints are received or ethical issues arise during the course of the project, investigators should advise the Executive Officer of the Ethics Committee on 03 6226 7479 or human.ethics@utas.edu.au.
3. Incidents or adverse effects: Investigators should notify the Ethics Committee immediately of any serious or unexpected adverse effects on participants or unforeseen events affecting the ethical acceptability of the project.

A PARTNERSHIP PROGRAM IN CONJUNCTION WITH THE DEPARTMENT OF HEALTH AND HUMAN SERVICES

4. Amendments to Project: Modifications to the project must not proceed until approval is obtained from the Ethics Committee. Please submit an Amendment Form (available on our website) to notify the Ethics Committee of the proposed modifications.
5. Annual Report: Continued approval for this project is dependent on the submission of a Progress Report by the anniversary date of your approval. You will be sent a courtesy reminder closer to this date. **Failure to submit a Progress Report will mean that ethics approval for this project will lapse.**
6. Final Report: A Final Report and a copy of any published material arising from the project, either in full or in abstract, must be provided at the end of the project.

Yours sincerely



Marilyn Pugsley
Ethics Officer

Appendix 2

Invitation to Students to Participate

My name is Allan Herrmann and I am a doctoral student at the Faculty of Education at University.

My supervisors are Dr. Sharon Pittaway and Associate Professor Sharon Fraser and my thesis topic is:

The impact of the use of technology on student and staff engagement within the context of fully online, distance pre-service teacher education at the University of Tasmania. (Ethics Approval Ref: H0011690)

Through this study I am seeking to investigate students' experiences of engagement in an online, distance teaching and learning environment. Participation is through three one hour interviews. As I understand that your time is very valuable, these interviews could be held over a span of a couple of months and undertaken at times and places to suit you.

For the purpose of this study the following types of students are particularly encouraged to participate:

- Fully online, distance, pre-service education student of the Faculty of Education (University);
- Living in areas remote from the university's campuses; and
- With no previous undergraduate experience prior to beginning their current course;

Should you be interested in participating, please read the attached, more detailed information and contact me at adh@postoffice.utas.edu.au or phone 6266 3073 at your earliest convenience. I would also be happy to answer any questions which you might have about the study.

I appreciate that you are a busy person; however, I believe that you will find participation beneficial as it will provide you with an opportunity to engage in structured reflection on your learning experiences and your attitude towards fully online learning.

Appendix 3

Invitation to Tutors to Participate

My name is Allan Herrmann and I am a doctoral student at the Faculty of Education at University.

My supervisors are Dr. Sharon Pittaway and Associate Professor Sharon Fraser and my thesis topic is:

The impact of the use of technology on student and staff engagement within the context of fully online, distance pre-service teacher education at the University of Tasmania. (Ethics Approval Ref: H0011690)

Through this study I am seeking to investigate the faculty experience of engagement in an online, distance teaching and learning environment through your participation in two or three one hour interviews. As I understand that your time is very valuable, these interviews would be held over a span of a couple of months and undertaken at times and places to suit you.

For the purposes of this study staff involved in online teaching within the BEd course in one or more of the following roles are particularly encouraged to participate:

- unit designer;
- unit co-ordinator;
- tutor.

Should you be interested in participating, please read the attached, more detailed information and contact me at adh@postoffice.utas.edu.au or phone 6266 3073 at your earliest convenience. I would also be happy to answer any questions which you might have about the study.

I appreciate that you are a busy person; however, I believe that you will find the experience beneficial through providing you with an opportunity to engage in structured reflection on your teaching experience and your attitude towards fully online teaching.

Appendix 4

Semi-Structured Interview Guide for Students

Student semi-structured Interviews

Interview One

Introduction and settling in

Greeting and overview of the study (including assurance of anonymity, definitions of technology in this context, etc.) and how this interview will proceed. It will be acknowledged that some of the questions may apply broadly across the university experience and the course experience, but will focus on specific online distance units of study.

Agreement to proceed

Participant provides background information – on a prepared paper form.

Interview Questions

Gathering students' experiences regarding engagement

Engagement

At any stage, I would encourage you to provide anecdotes to assist with your explanations.

Given that this study is about, I would be interested to know what you think the term means in the context of your studies. What might it “look like”?

Could you describe any difference between:

- engagement and motivation
- engagement and commitment.

With what do you engage? Faculty, university, course, teaching, ...

How do you experience ‘engagement’?

Is being engaged with you study at University important to your long term aims?

Appendix 4

Are you a student or a student teacher?

Background

- When you were at school, what types of things interested you most? Sport, subjects, etc.
 - Why do you think this was so?
- At home, what types of things interested you most?
 - Why do you think this was so?
- What sort of access to and use of technology did you have:
 - At home?
 - At school?
 - Any favourites?

The course

- Why did you choose this course?
- Why did you choose this mode of study?
- What do you consider to be the advantages and disadvantages of studying to become a teacher through distance online study?
- During the year, have you seriously considered withdrawing from your course? If so why?

Studying

- How often do you go online during the week to undertake activity related to your course of study?
- What types of things do you do while online?
- On average, how much time do you spend on your study (excluding going online) during each week of semester?
- Do you feel challenged by your study in this course? [In what way challenged? Intellectually, emotionally, socially ...?]
- What sorts of things might prompt you to go online?

Appendix 4

- How does your study at University mix with and impact on your everyday life? What are the challenges you have faced so far fitting study with work and family life? How do you (have you) overcome these challenges?

Attitude to study

- How important is it to you to achieve a high standard in this course?
- Do you think that you work harder than peers to achieve more? *[Not sure about the purpose of this question]*
- Do you consider the following important for success as a distance online student?
 - Analysing some of the ideas being put forward by lecturers and fellow students?
 - Applying what was learned in everyday life to what was being learned in the course?
 - Actively putting ideas together and developing them further?
- Are you actively encouraged to do these?
- What are the challenges/opportunities for you as a distance online student to engage in your studies in these ways?

Aspects of study (reading, interacting, etc)

- In your experience during this course, can you tell me whether you have initiated some action or activity online without being asked? If not, were there any impediments to your doing so? If yes, can you give me an example of what you did, how you did it and the outcome.
- Have you done any of the following:
 - Actively sought advice from your lecturer?
 - Completed all of your required readings before the specified time?
 - Read more widely than required and contributed this to the group discussion?
 - Used student learning support services?
 - Kept up to date with your work?
- Are those aspects of study (above) factors you consciously consider when studying?

Appendix 4

- In your experience during this course, can you tell me about the type, amount and quality of your reading?
- Do you read all of the set readings for the course? e.g. 25% 50% 75% 100% 100+%
- What do you like most about your online experience? Tell me about one of the times that you enjoyed studying online.
- What do you like least about your online experience? Tell me about one of the times that you least enjoyed studying online.

Group work

- Have you experienced group work online? If so, what are some of the benefits of working as a member of group? What are some of the limitations/barriers? If not, would you like to? Why/why not?
- What do you enjoy about working as a member of a group?
- Do you prefer learning alone or as part of a group?

Relationships

- Do you have contact with your lecturers and/or fellow students other than online? If so how and what kind of contact?
- Do you consider the development of positive relationships to be an important aspect of study?
- In the units you have studied so far, in what ways have positive relationships with teaching staff been developed/actively encouraged?
- In what ways have positive relationships been developed with the wider Faculty?
- In general, how would you describe your relationship with your lecturers/tutors?
- Does your relationship with teaching staff impact on your commitment to study? Please provide an example to illustrate your response.
- In the units you have studied so far, in what ways have positive relationships with other students been developed/actively encouraged?

Appendix 4

- In general, how would you describe your relationship with other students?
- Does your relationship with other students impact on your commitment to study? Please provide an example to illustrate your response.
- Do you identify yourself to other people as a university of XXXXX student? Please provide examples of the contexts and ways?

Being on campus

- Have you been to one of the University campuses? What was the purpose of being on campus? What was your experience of being on-campus? (if the purpose was to undertake a face-to-face class – through a residential summer school, for instance – how different was your experience of learning in this way, from your usual experience of studying online?)
- Do you go on campus on a regular basis? How often do you visit a University campus?
- Can you describe the process and thought you go through in deciding to visit campus?
- What do you usually do while you're there? (for example do you go to the library or use the student services, the cafe?)
- Do you interact with the university in any way and for any reason other than your study online?

Support services

- What university support services have you accessed? Describe your experience. (In what way have you accessed support services? Online/phone/Skype/specific website/in person?)

Interview Two – focussing on technology

(These are the basis of questions to be raised with the participants. Depending on the discussion heads, some may be omitted and others, more appropriate added.)

Opportunity for participants to discuss previous interview data, make changes and clarifications.

- Can you tell me about the kinds of technologies you use in your daily life? (Stimulus ideas include EFT, ATM, computers, mobile phones, facebook, email, messaging, kitchen appliances)

Appendix 4

- On a scale of 1 (not confident) – 10 (extremely confident) how confident are you in using technologies – of those named and from list above?
- How would you typify yourself as a technology user? Do you 'take up' technologies soon after you hear about them, or do you wait for a while?
- (If necessary) Could you explain why you might see yourself that way?
- Please describe your level of experience with computers [technology] before beginning study?
- Can you describe the new technologies you have encountered while studying (within and outside the university)?
- How successfully do you think that you have mastered these new technologies?
- How confident do you think teaching staff are with using technology?
- How creative are they in using technology?
- How does the technology you use make your study experience any different from someone who is studying on campus?
- How do you think technology that you use has changed the way you study and relate to other students, your lecturers and the university in general?

We finished the previous interview with a question about what engagement might look like.

How might technology, as you've been describing in this interview, help or hinder that engagement?

[For interview two, participants will be invited to bring along any artefacts which exemplify how they feel about their study or what using technology means to them. This may include but not be restricted to, examples of highs and lows or some reflections which they have produced. These may be used to give form to the discussion.]

Appendix 5

Semi-Structured Interview Guide for Tutors

Interview One

Introduction and settling in

Greeting and overview of the study (including assurance of anonymity, definitions of technology in this context, etc.) and how this interview will proceed. It will be acknowledged that some of the questions may apply broadly across the Faculty and course online teaching experience, but will focus on specific distance online units of study with which the staff member is associated as a designer, Unit Co-ordinator and/or tutor.

Receipt of signed consent form (*see Appendix 6*) from participant

Agreement to proceed

Participant provides background information – on a prepared paper form.

Interview Questions

Overall approach:

Discuss with participants the way they feel students approach their study (questions based on AUSSE Student engagement questions) and use of technology in their online learning and its impact on how they (the students) engage with their study, staff, peers and the university.

Engagement

Given this study is about student engagement, I was wondering if you would like to begin by briefly outlining what you feel are the important issues about student engagement?

How do you feel that students experience some form of engagement and with what?

What indicators do you look for to know if students are engaging with something?

Appendix 5

How do you engage with the students?

Background

What would be the most significant positives about your work with students?

What would be the most significant negatives about your work with students?

Underlying ideas about online distance learning

Would you briefly outline your philosophy of teaching particularly as it relates to the online distance environment.

Can you please describe for me what happens when you prepare to 'teach' in an online environment?

Can you describe for me your online teaching process?

What in your view are the differences in pedagogic processes which apply to teaching face to face and distance online?

Perception of student attitudes to study and technology

Have you been a distance or online student? How do you think it feels?

Do you use these feelings in your design/teaching practice?

In your experience during teaching an online distance unit, have students:

- Initiated some action or activity online without being asked?
- Actively sought advice from you?
- Completed all of your required readings before the specified time?
- Read more widely than required and contributed this to the group discussion?
- Kept up to date with work?

(The participant will be asked to expand on the responses and provide anecdotes)

In your experience during this course, have students:

- Read and remembered facts?
- Analysed some of the ideas being put forward by you and fellow students?
- Applied what they have learned in their work life to the course?
- Actively put ideas together and to develop them further?

Appendix 5

(The participant will be asked to expand on the responses and provide anecdotes)

In your opinion, do they read all of the set readings for the course? e.g. 25% 50% 75% 100% 100+%

Gathering lecturer' experiences regarding student engagement.

On average, how much time do you believe that students spend online for each distance unit during each week of semester?

How do you feel about that? Too much not enough? ...

How confident do you think that they are with using online learning technology?

How creatively do they use the online learning technology?

Relationships

Do you believe that these students interact with the university in any way and for any reason other than their study online?

Do you initiate contact with students during the semester – in what ways?

How would you describe your relationship with online distance students?

How does the technology make their study experience any different from someone who is studying on campus?

How could technology be used to further enhance their engagement with their study, you and the university? What sort of 'new technologies' would be welcome if they were designed?

Appendix 5

Interview 2

Use of technology and confidence

What kinds of technology are you used to using in your daily life? (Stimulus ideas include EFT/online banking, ATM, computers, mobile phones, facebook, email, messaging, and kitchen appliances)

On a scale of 1 (not confident) – 10 (extremely confident) how confident are you in using technologies?

How would you typify yourself as a technology user? Do you 'take up' technologies soon after you hear about them, or do you wait for a while?

(If necessary) Could you explain why you might see yourself that way?

What are your preferred ways of working online?

Do you have any set procedures for working with students online? e.g. specific contact times; response times; options for on campus attendance.

Briefly, what is your view of the University LMS?

Online teaching

What role do you think that the unit designer plays in the quality of your unit?

What role do you think that the unit co-ordinator plays in the quality of your unit?

What role do you think that the tutor plays in the quality of your unit?

What new technologies have you encountered while teaching (within and outside the university)?

How successfully do you think that you have mastered the online environment?

In general, how successful do you believe your colleagues have been at teaching online?

What university distance teaching support services have you tried to access? How helpful was it/were they?

What do you like most about your online teaching experience?

Tell me about one of the times that you enjoyed teaching online.

What do you like least about your online experience?

Appendix 5

Tell me about one of the times that you least enjoyed teaching online.

On average, how often do you go online for each unit?

What sorts of things do you do while teaching online?

Have you designed group work or other collaborative activities online into your unit? If so, how do you think that it went? If not, are there any reasons for not using group work?

Do you think that distance online students tend to work as hard as on campus students to achieve?

How do you think technology that you use has changed the way you teach and relate to students?

How do you believe that students relate to each other in an online environment?

Appendix 6

Consent Form

Title of Project: The impact of the use of technology on student and staff engagement within the context of fully online, distance pre-service teacher education at the University
(Ethics Approval Ref: H0011690)

-
1. I have read and understood the 'Information Sheet' for this project.
 2. The nature and possible effects of the study have been explained to me.
 3. I understand that the study involves two or perhaps three unstructured, recorded interviews each of approximately one hour, either face to face, over the telephone or on Skype.
 4. I understand that all research data will be securely stored for five years and will then be destroyed.
 5. Any questions that I have asked have been answered to my satisfaction.
 6. I understand that I will be provided the opportunity to review a transcript of my interviews and amend any factual inaccuracies.
 7. I agree that research data gathered from me for the study may be published provided that I cannot be identified as a participant.
 8. I understand that the researchers will maintain my identity confidential and that any information I supply to the researcher will be used only for the purposes of the research.
 9. I agree to participate in this investigation and understand that I may withdraw at any time without any effect, and if I so wish may request that any data I have supplied to date be withdrawn from the research.

Name of Participant:

Signature:

Date:

Statement by Investigator

☐ I have explained the project & the implications of participation in it to this volunteer and I believe that the consent is informed and that he/she understands the implications of participation

If the Investigator has not had an opportunity to talk to participants prior to them participating, the following must be ticked.

☐ The participant has received the Information Sheet where my details have been provided so participants have the opportunity to contact me prior to consenting to participate in this project.

Name of investigator Allan Herrmann

Signature of investigator _____ Date _____

